

Rolling Stone ^{UK}

APRIL/MAY 2022
ISSUE 004

Burna Boy

The unrelenting rise
of the African giant



Blossoms
Charli XCX
Fontaines D.C.
Ashley Walters
Let's Eat Grandma
Jennifer Lopez
Mimi Webb
Wet Leg
Mitski

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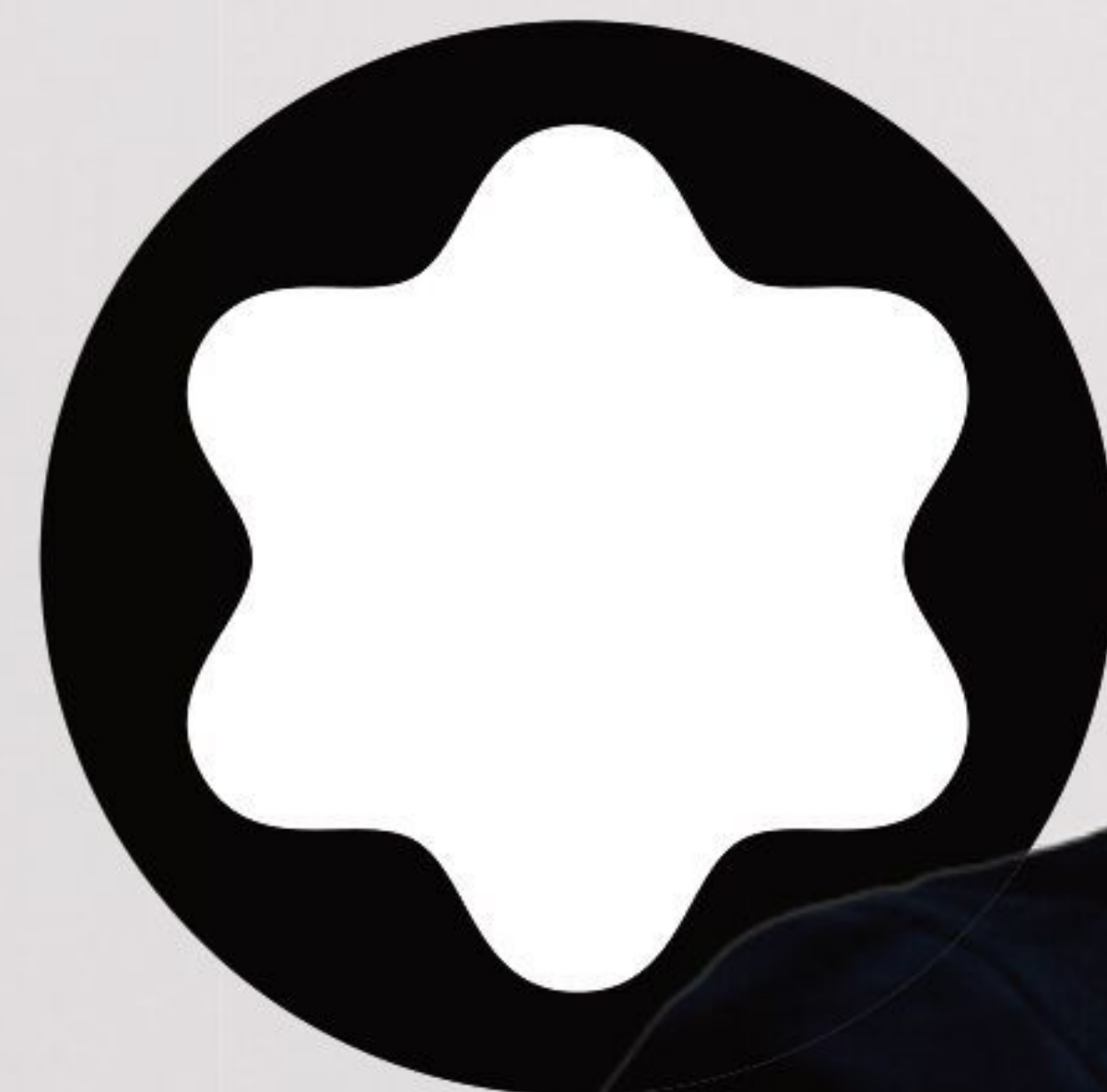
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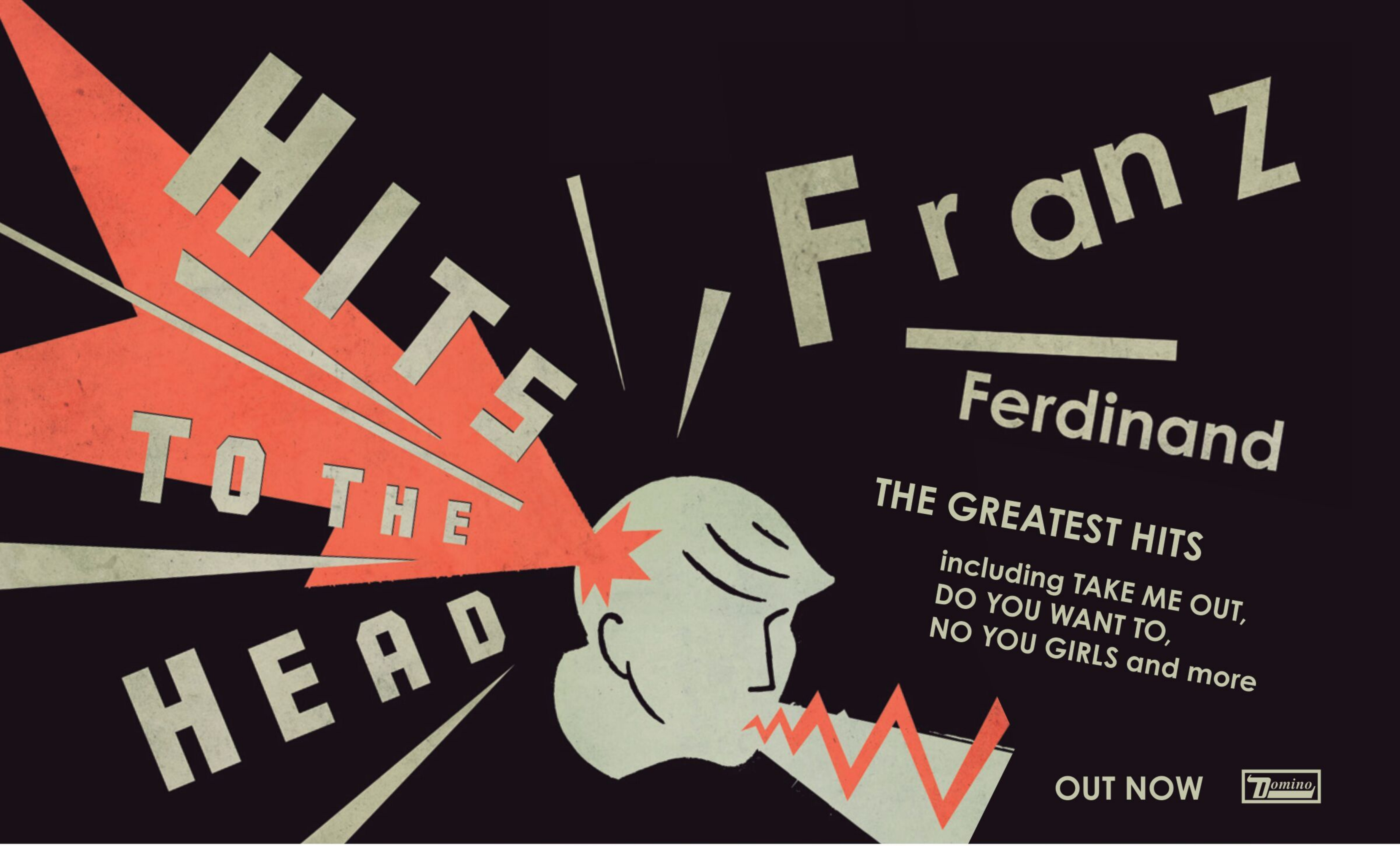
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HOW IT'S GOING





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ISSUE
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“I almost just feel like this album title is becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy. I *feel* very explosive right now”

CHARLI XCX

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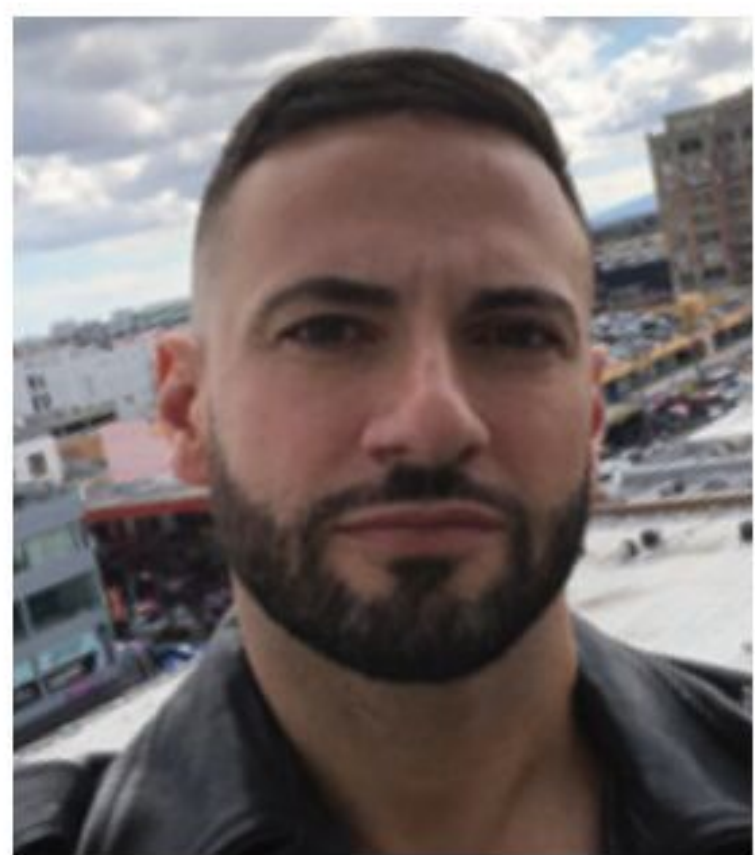
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Editor's Letter

Putin's war seeks to erase Ukraine's cultural identity



AT THE TIME of going to print, Russia is three weeks into its invasion of Ukraine, the death count is rising, and more than 2.5 million people have been displaced from their homes and separated from their families and friends.

War is the most abhorrent trait of humanity. Our predisposition to inflict harm on ourselves doesn't just destroy houses and buildings, it strips communities of what defines them: cultural identity.

In refusing to recognise Ukraine's independence, Putin has made clear his intention to rebuild the former Soviet empire. His forced cultural homogeneity will not just mean the occupation of Ukraine's territory; it will result in the suppression of Ukrainians' basic right to freedom of speech, with a silencing of artists, musicians, actors, educators, writers – anyone who uses their voice to defy the Russian dictator's autocratic rule.

Although Putin has continually sought to delegitimise a free Ukraine, the nation has underscored its sovereignty. Recent laws promoted the Ukrainian language over Russian: all print media outlets are required to publish a Ukrainian-language version, while 35 per cent of music on the radio must be performed in Ukrainian.

The arts have forever been the backbone of resistance to oppression. From the performers of pre-Nazi Berlin to recent authors (such as Salman Rushdie, who had a fatwa placed on him because of his 1988 book *The Satanic Verses*), the arts are often where rigid rules are questioned and alternative ideas promoted.

“The arts have forever been the backbone of resistance to oppression”

In Russia, founding member of Pussy Riot and vocal Putin critic Nadya Tolokonnikova launched a member-owned crypto community that produced 10,000 NFTs featuring the Ukrainian flag, raising \$6.7 million to support Come Back Alive, which will distribute supplies to Ukrainian civilians and the army. In Moscow, the director of the Russian capital's state-run Meyerhold Center theatre, Elena Kovalskaya, has stepped down from her position. “You can't work for a killer and get paid by him,” she said in a statement on Facebook. Elsewhere, the curator and artists representing Russia at the Venice Biennale resigned.

Make no mistake, Putin isn't simply seeking to take control of the borders of Ukraine. In order to exercise his complete control, he will eventually erase an entire nation's artistic and cultural history. What will remain is the megalomaniac's own misogynistic, anti-LGBTQ+, xenophobic, oppressive, and entirely constrictive ideology.

There's a challenging road ahead, and a resolution seems complex and uncertain. We hope and pray that a de-escalation happens soon, with a swift return of freedom and independence for the Ukrainian people.

A stylized, handwritten signature of Cliff Joannou in black ink.

CLIFF JOANNOU
EDITOR IN CHIEF

ON THE COVER



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BURNA BOY WEARS JEWELLERY, HIS OWN

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Terna Jogo
PHOTOGRAPHER

This shoot brought a lot of new experiences for me. My first editorial for Rolling Stone UK, my first time visiting the Isle of Wight — and travelling through some treacherous waters to get there — and my first time capturing an indie band. I am someone that likes to go with the flow — shooting Wet Leg’s Rhian Teasdale and Hester Chambers brought a whole new meaning to that. When the day came to an end, Chambers thanked me for my patience while shooting them as she says they can be quite “floaty”. This strikes me as the perfect way to describe herself and Teasdale, as you never know what they’ll do next. The shoot had an element of serendipity because of Wet Leg’s spontaneous and endearing friendship, which I think came through in the photos.



I'VE GOT YOU
One of Terna Jogo's shots of Wet Leg



Jason Okundaye
WRITER

I first watched Ashley Walters in the original 2011 *Summerhouse* series of *Top Boy*, but didn’t realise until a few years ago that the same artist had rapped one of my favourite verses in So Solid Crew’s ‘21 Seconds’. Perhaps I hadn’t recognised him because I was consuming all this media far too young. Turning 40 this year, Walters is one of a handful of older Black British male actors who’s still ‘on top’ even while much younger Black men take up the limelight. I wanted to get a sense of the transitions he’s made across his decades in the entertainment industry, and of everything he’s observed about Black British actors — nothing glossy or overly sanguine, but the raw, honest truth. When we ended our interview, he said, “You’re intense, bruv!” so I knew I’d achieved what I set out to do.



Lucy-Isobel Bonner
STYLIST

My early exposure in styling and visual storytelling was via David LaChapelle and his *Rolling Stone* covers. I’ve followed Charli since her PC Music days, and her gig with SOPHIE at SXSW’s Hype Hotel really solidified her as an artist for me. This is my favourite Charli era and I wanted to do justice to the human and the hyperpop star. Covers are timeless and I chose to find looks that mark the sentiment of her new chapter. When I think of those early covers from *Rolling Stone* that led me to where I am now, it’s this beautiful collaboration of creative and artist that make great storytelling and images that last a lifetime. I’d worked with the photographer Jack indirectly before via Poster Girl, whose sexy, bejewelled jumpsuit we shot, and the writer and staffer Hannah also wrote one of my most revisited and recommended books, *Fangirls*. Being a major fan of both talent and team is how magical stories are made.



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Wardrobe heroes

The comic-book cult shows no signs of slowing down, especially with Zoë Kravitz and R-Patz starring in the latest epic iteration at the cinema. Now DC Comics' Batman and Catwoman have joined forces with Lanvin for their Spring/Summer 2022 collection. The infamous duo's faces appear on the label's signature asymmetric shirt, mesh metal dresses, a reversible teddy jacket and leather goods. With powerful Art Deco lines of Gotham City, and the DC comic colours of purple and blue, these pieces really pack some pow.

LANVIN.COM

Opening Act



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[PARAJUMPERS.IT](https://www.parajumpers.it)



Crystal Clear

We come face-to-face with glass everyday: the pint in our hands, the window we pull down, the picture frames we gaze at. Rarely, do we see its artistic merit. Yet it's a perfect material to work with: the heat of a furnace transforms grains of silica into molten lava, which can be stretched, moulded or blown into any shape imaginable. This year, the Henry Moore Institute in Leeds is presenting exhibitions showcasing artists at the forefront of innovative sculpture. Its free exhibition, *A State of Matter: Modern and Contemporary Glass Sculpture*, showing from now until 5 June, will change how you think about glass forever.

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Opening Act

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[MONTREUXJAZZFESTIVAL.COM](https://montreuxjazzfestival.com)

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24 november	O2 city hall, newcastle ■
25 november	academy, manchester ●
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The Mix

WHAT'S NEW, WHAT'S NEXT, WHAT'S NUTS

Finding their groove

Dublin band Fontaines D.C. unveil a new sound on their latest album Skinty Fia, as their roots continue to inspire them

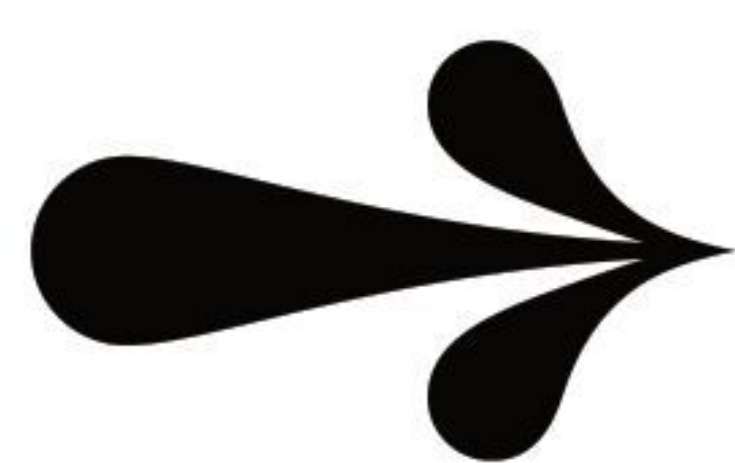




GRIAN



CARLOS



When Fontaines D.C. first arrived with 2019 debut *Dogrel*, the Dublin band won plaudits for tunes that balanced subtle post-punk

guitars against weightier themes of corruption, religion and Irish identity – all delivered by the intense vocals of frontman Grian Chatten.

The record netted them a Mercury Prize nod, while the follow-up, 2020's *A Hero's Death*, went one better with a Grammy Award nomination for Best Rock Album.

But their latest, *Skinty Fia*, which arrives in April, might just be their strongest album yet. It builds on the groove of the last two, while mining new sonic and personal depths. These qualities are displayed on hit recent single 'I Love You', which is the closest thing the band have written to a love song, but one that also manages to become a haunting ode to the issues they believe are plaguing their homeland.

"It's standing in the centre of our beloved home country as a multitude of things are brought to tragic ends in an apocalyptic state of affairs. That's how it feels to me, and what I felt when I wrote it," Chatten has said previously.

Rolling Stone UK caught up with Chatten and guitarist Carlos O'Connell to discuss the new album.

Grian, how does *Skinty Fia* move the sound of Fontaines D.C. on from *A Hero's Death*?

GRIAN: There's more breathing space and a

"I found myself visually in this tornado of shit that was going on between Ireland and England"

— *Chatten*

groove is established. There's no groove on the first two records in the same way and we're not leaning into something so much on this record. There's more of a Trojan Horse thing of creating a mood to draw the listener in, and once we're in then our ideology and ideas come out. But it's easy listening first, through songs like 'Roman Holiday'. I'd say that song was quite inspired by Kurt Vile; I saw him play in Croatia two years ago when we were playing there and I envied him. The sun was going down and he was able to stand there and chill out. We spend ten minutes before going on stage slapping each other in the face! I envy someone who can send a text to his kid, go off on stage and then just play really well. **The album track 'Big Shot', meanwhile, is the first Fontaines track you've written, Carlos.**

CARLOS: The lockdown gave me time to do it and I was feeling confident about it. We went back to the thing we'd do years ago of sending each other tunes on email, which felt amazing. It's a song that tries to make sense of finding value

after achieving something you've worked on for a while. You've finally achieved this thing, but you get there and things don't feel any different. It's an existential song and trying to expose the idea that maybe there is no value, even if we're led to believe that we're important. I don't find the value of anything in that song, but I definitely exposed what I think is worthless and not as important as I believed.

Thematically, there's some real darkness, too. 'I Love You' sounds romantic, but references how 800 babies were discovered in a mass grave at the Bon Secours Mother and Baby Home in Galway.

GRIAN: I was trying to write a love song, but I found this thread of emotional connection and I got into one of those states where you black out while writing and a few hours later you look back and realise everything you wrote really came from somewhere. I found myself visually in the middle of this tornado of shit that was going on in Ireland and England. All of the spirits of things I take issue with; things that are upsetting but you ignore them. It was all raised from the dead at the same time and I was trying to make sense of it all. **You've also spoken about how the record is influenced by your struggles with guilt about leaving Ireland and moving to London.**

GRIAN: I'd spoken so much about Ireland in the



CURLEY

past few years, and it became associated with us almost as a brand, even if that wasn't our intention. So it felt like we were using Ireland as inspiration, our source material for songs; we were blowing that horn. But I was happy as fucking larry with my flat in north London with a little balcony when things weren't locked down.

Meanwhile, my little brother only went to college face to face for the first time last week, even though he's been there for a few years now. I feel like I have been disconnected somewhat, in a privileged life, from Ireland's issues. 'I Love You' tries to be the reconnection.

The opening track 'In ár gCroíthe go deo' is named after the Celtic phrase that the family of an Irish woman in Coventry had to fight to have inscribed on her grave.

GRIAN: Nationalism is on the rise everywhere, populism, too, and a love for 'dear old Blighty'. Imagine a nation as a ship and when something happens, an element of shame in the national consciousness will bring the boat down. But at the same time, the other end will rise up and that's the pride. You look at the historical statues being pulled down recently and there's gonna be a resurgence of people thinking their freedom of speech and national identity is threatened.

I do think recently it's become a bit of a thing again, this treatment of Irish people, and because there's a slight lack of discourse about the treatment of Irish people by English people in London – compared to other communities who are treated much worse – English people think there's a bit of a free pass.



DEEGO

Irish people for a while have not wanted it to be there: there's a rhetoric that it's not like it was in the 80s and 90s. And it's not, but it is still there and Irish people have been putting up with it in attempts to move on.

CARLOS: There's a poisonous nationalism that's grown in England, too, and I think it's down to the lack of truthful history that's taught. There was something telling I experienced. It was Remembrance Sunday and someone raised a glass to all the fallen soldiers of the British Army at a dinner I was at. He raised this glass in front of me, and I just didn't know if I could raise a glass to the people who were responsible for all these horrors in Ireland. I don't think he did it on purpose, but I just don't think he knew the things that came with saying that. I found that so dangerous, the fact that someone could so easily say something like that. The experience of that song is just two years ago, it was considered the language of the enemy. And that's absolutely insane.

Your turnaround has been pretty prolific, this is your third album since 2019...

GRIAN: I never wanted to be stuck as a new band, so writing *A Hero's Death* just allayed those fears. Three albums in and we're not a new band. But we've always found necessity to writing: the first album had us with a lot to say about Dublin. The second was an attempt



TOM

to find solace in the maelstrom of a hectic tour schedule, but this record finds us moving countries and having a reappraisal of Irish identity through the eyes of London. There have been three distinct chapters.

But we've written fuck all in the past year, which validates for me that we only write when we have reason to do so. For now, I just want to be the band that makes *Skinty Fia* for a while 'cos I really like the album and I think that's a fucking cool band to be. I don't want to put parameters around it, because I just want to enjoy it.

Are you more settled than you previously were, then?

GRIAN: There's more longevity in the live shows we do now. It's more easy to access the tunes and the way I feel because I was overwhelmed with adrenaline. It was getting silly: it got to the level where I was cutting my face with a plastic knife and it struck a vein once when we were playing in Amsterdam. I had insomnia and I got really depressed on tour, so I'd get the knife I used for bread and butter and just do that. It went too deep and I spent the first four songs of the gig just slapping blood away from my face. There's no more of that and I feel connected with the audience more. I don't feel like it's me against them and I'm not locking horns with that. **NICK REILLY**

MUSIC

Poetry in motion

Meet Cristale, the silver-tongued south London wordsmith who has her sights firmly set on bringing about change

I SEE MYSELF REACHING heights that people have never reached before,” declares Cristale, showing Rolling Stone UK the vision board hanging on her bedroom wall. The 20-year-old south London artist, whose extensive creative repertoire includes rapping, singing, writing poetry and illustrating, has a very clear idea of the direction in which she wants to take her career.

The Brixton-raised artist – full name Cristale Deabreu – has loved music for as long as she can remember. Growing up in a Caribbean household, she credits her mother with introducing her to some of her favourite artists. “A lot of the music I love that doesn’t correlate with my age was introduced to me via my mum,” she explains. One artist in particular who had a big impact on her upbringing was Lauryn Hill. “I don’t know how to put it into words,” Cristale says, trying to describe the effect the Fugees frontwoman’s music had on her. “It just doesn’t make sense to me that music no longer sounds like that.”

Cristale’s foray into performing came by way of her uncle – himself a rapper – who encouraged her to pursue a career in music. He helped her pen her first bars, which she took to the playground of her primary school and used in rap battles with other kids. It was at this point that she developed a love for words and was soon entering – and regularly winning – poetry competitions. “My relationship with words became an obsession,” she says. “It’s what helped me

become a wordsmith rather than just a rapper.”

She started garnering attention for her music in early 2020, around the same time the coronavirus reared its ugly head, rapping over instrumentals by other artists. After spitting a freestyle over the beat for Drake and Headie One’s ‘Only You’, she was retweeted by Headie, one of several famous admirers impressed by her lyrical dexterity and effortless delivery. Since then, she’s released a few singles, including her latest, the vibrant, panpipe-led ‘Militant’, taken part in a few high-profile rap ciphers, and signed a record deal with Black Butter and Sony Music joint venture label, 4ZA.

More recently, Cristale’s been enjoying huge viral success thanks to a snippet of her dancehall-infused new single ‘Bong Bing’ featuring Laa Lee racking up millions of views on TikTok. It’s something she can’t quite fathom.

“It’s not really resonating or registering with me the fact that people actually want to hear what I’ve got to say,” she observes. “Maybe I’m not supposed to understand it. Maybe I’m just supposed to receive my blessings.”

These career landmarks have all been reached while Cristale continues to study fine art at the University of the Arts London, which she admits has been a bit of a slog due to the interruptions caused by COVID-19. Her frustrations are referenced on her 2021 track ‘Morgan’: “*Tell Boris I want a refund on my course, ain’t been to class since February*”.



“It’s not really registering with me the fact that people actually want to hear what I’ve got to say”

She adds: “Going back to uni was a bit mad because a lot of people started recognising me – not as a student but someone they’ve seen online.”

This newfound fame must feel a little overwhelming. “That’s a complete understatement,” she says, laughing and shaking her head in mild disbelief at her rapid rise. “People often tell me they don’t think I quite understand how fast I’m progressing. I can see it, but I’m trying not to take too much in so I don’t get big-headed over it. I’m just trying to show that I’m very grateful for all the success that I’ve enjoyed so far.”

But far more than praise and accolades, Cristale is more concerned with being a beacon for her community and a role model for any young person chasing a dream. “I want to open doors for

my community,” she says. She also wants to do away with the pressures that plague those who constantly compare themselves to others, which can have damaging effects on a person’s physical and psychological well-being. “I want people to resonate with my music,” she explains. “I don’t want to make people feel bad. I don’t want it to make them compare themselves to others. I want to stop that whole comparison shit.”

It’s evident she’s ready to put the work in, and she’s looking forward to reaping the rewards – just so long as her mother gets to enjoy them, too. “She deserves to be walking London Fashion Week and Paris Fashion Week, and going into the studio with me and flying around the world,” she says. “My mum gave me everything, and I wouldn’t be here without her.” **WILL LAVIN**

BRETT ELDREDGE

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MON 2	MAY	GLASGOW O ₂ ACADEMY
TUE 3	MAY	BELFAST ULSTER HALL
THU 5	MAY	LEEDS O ₂ ACADEMY
FRI 6	MAY	BIRMINGHAM O ₂ INSTITUTE
SUN 8	MAY	MANCHESTER O ₂ RITZ
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06 SEP LONDON
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12 OCT	LONDON ELECTRIC BALLROOM
14 OCT	GLASGOW ST. LUKE'S
15 OCT	MANCHESTER ACADEMY 2
18 OCT	BIRMINGHAM O ₂ INSTITUTE 2
19 OCT	NOTTINGHAM RESCUE ROOMS

BRETT YOUNG

NOVEMBER 2022

FRI 11 CAMBRIDGE
JUNCTION

SAT 12 MANCHESTER
ACADEMY 2

SUN 13 LONDON
O₂ SHEPHERD'S BUSH EMPIRE

TUE 15 GLASGOW
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13TH JUNE RESCUE ROOMS NOTTINGHAM
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15TH JUNE GORILLA MANCHESTER
21ST JUNE LAFAYETTE LONDON



IAN NOE
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31 MAY
LONDON LAFAYETTE



MADISON CUNNINGHAM
15 MAY BIRMINGHAM O₂ INSTITUTE 3
16 MAY BRISTOL THEKLA
19 MAY NOTTINGHAM THE BODEGA
20 MAY MANCHESTER THE DEAF INSTITUTE

MUSIC

It takes two

There's no separation anxiety for Let's Eat Grandma as they find their individual voices

BY WILL RICHARDS

SINCE THEIR 2016 breakout with debut album *I, Gemini*, Jenny Hollingworth and Rosa Walton have been inseparable on and off stage, pushing a 'twin' narrative to the point where many believed they were siblings. But on the third album *Two Ribbons*, the members of Let's Eat Grandma wrote separately for the first time.

As with any two best friends feeling their way through their teens, the pair's tastes and interests changed, bringing them closer together in some instances, and pushing them apart in others. "I don't think there was ever a point when we stopped hanging out," Walton ponders from the London offices of the band's label, Transgressive. "But we've also allowed each other our space as individuals, too, which has been really helpful. We're not tied at the hip like we used to be."

Hollingworth adds: "Because of how we presented ourselves as twins, we kind of thought we were exactly the same, just like everyone else did. But then we realised ourselves that we're actually quite different people."

"Even though we were always talking to each other, we weren't really *talking* to each other"

— Walton

The teething process of this realisation is laid out brilliantly on the album's opening track, 'Happy New Year', which was the first song Walton wrote for what would become *Two Ribbons*. "Just think, if we'd have been together we'd be breaking up," she sings over shimmering synths and pulsating bass. At its euphoric resolution, she decides: "Nothing that was broken can touch how much I care for you / Because you know you'll always be my best friend."

The vastly different process of writing this album means its lyrics interact with each other but come from two different perspectives rather than presenting a united front. "We ended up writing about each other because we were both thinking about that a lot," Hollingworth says. "It does all gel together naturally, though, because we've learned how to write songs together."

Walton also had to contend with the process of writing the album while working through grief and trauma following the death of her boyfriend, the singer Billy Clayton, from bone cancer in 2019.

She describes the process as "emotionally challenging", and the



works-in-progress songs became a way for her and Hollingworth to communicate with each other. "Even though we were always talking to each other, we weren't really *talking* to each other," she says. "We weren't able to get our emotions out."

Although *Two Ribbons* is an album that's musically diverse – 'Levitation' follows the lead of 'Happy New Year' into club-ready euphoria, 'Watching You

Go' is a heart-wrenching, slowcore highlight, while the album's closing song and title track is a strikingly vulnerable acoustic cut – the thread that ties it together is a sense of growth, change and forward movement.

Recording in the east London studio of David Wrench, who worked on 'I'm All Ears' and whose other credits include Frank Ocean, The xx and Sampha, the band's time working on the new



album was fragmented due to intermittent lockdowns, meaning the process from start to finish took an entire year.

Over the course of that period, the pair's relationship as friends and bandmates grew and changed, as they helped each other through personal issues and used *Two Ribbons* as the vessel that would guide them towards whatever's next. To them, the finished album is representative of this journey,

“We realised that we’re quite different people” — *Hollingworth*

and the changes they saw both inside and outside of themselves are reflected in the music.

“There’s a lot of references to the seasons,” Hollingworth says, “and there’s a measure of time changing throughout the record.” Walton picks up this theme: “We wanted

the sound palette to reflect what season we were in at that time. In my head, ‘Insect Loop’ is so winter, and ‘Sunday’ is so summer. You can hear that in the warmth or the icyness of any song.”

The band's best and most accomplished album, *Two Ribbons*

picks apart the fabric of *Let's Eat Grandma* and gives a window into the nuances of two people who, until now, have largely been considered one and the same. Through Walton's trance-like bangers and Hollingworth's woozy, unguarded exorcisms, the new album accentuates the pair's differences but ends up finding them more connected than ever before. Together, they're ready to tackle anything. **®**

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SPRING/
SUMMER



Bakar

Ayra Starr



Anz



Daisy Brain



Cassette

Fusing a defiant punk spirit with shades of electro-pop and nu-metal, Essex-born newcomer Cassette could be the rock hero that Gen Z is crying out for. Her latest track 'Mayhem' evokes the spirit of Avril Lavigne in telling how ending a relationship is probably the best idea for everyone. "I had that feeling in the pit of my stomach that our time was up, and we both wanted to let go," she sings.

Luke Royalty

"I think it's time we let a little sun in," croons Luke Royalty in a King Krule-esque delivery on recent track 'blue peter'.

The Darlington newcomer is on a mission to live up to that mantra, delivering sun-drenched tunes that are destined to become the soundtrack of kicking back for one last serotonin fix this summer.



Cassette

Bakar

Bakar first burst onto the scene with his self-titled debut mixtape in 2018, but his debut album, released in February, offers the fullest look at his kaleidoscopic talent.

Over louche and laid-back indie pop, the Camden Town singer tackles everything from his experiences of being a first-generation immigrant to his hopes for his own future. Recent highlights include the startling 'Build Me a Way', a frank dissection of lost identity and the hope of being found once more.

Baba Ali

Influences don't come more eclectic than those of Baba Ali, who counts J Dilla, Stevie Nicks, Nick Cave and personal relative Fela Kuti among his musical heroes.

But this musical mish-mash works wonders on the Yard Act-backed New Yorker's debut album *Memory Device*, which pairs dance floor-ready beats against dark, Cave-style lyrics that ponder the cost of a heavy night out.

Anz

Manchester-born Anz first cut her teeth in her home city's legendary club scene, proving herself to be one of the UK's most accomplished and genre-spanning producers.

Her recent EP *All Hours* is a joyful ode to the power of embracing every part of the day — which in this case means finishing up on the dancefloor till dawn. The lead single 'You Could Be' is a club classic in the making.

Ibeyi

All signs suggest that the Afro-French Cuban duo's third album will be their strongest yet. Sisters Lisa-Kaindé and Naomi Diaz blend classic

sounds with modern, trip-hop sensibilities. It's no wonder that Pa Salieu, Jorja Smith and BERWYN have queued up for duets on their latest record.

Ayra Starr

At just 19, this Nigerian star is being dubbed the future of Afropop. Her debut album *19 & Dangerous* proves she has what it takes to compete with that genre's global stars (see Wizkid, Burna Boy), while also establishing her own identity. Offering a brilliant riposte to negativity on recent track 'Bloody Samaritan', she sings: "Vibe killer, bloody Samaritan / Protect my energy from your bad aura."

Daisy Brain

Daisy Brain's alt-pop tunes might sound like they're straight from the 90s, but the grungy landscape is a world away from his lyrics — which take a razor-sharp and up-to-date look at Gen Z anxieties.

"It's really just me screaming for help, to be honest; my mood can swing dramatically and I realise I deal with it in quite a negative way," he says of recent track 'What Would You Do?'.

"But at the same time I'm not entirely sure how to change that. The song is asking the question to everyone else about how they deal with feeling this way — Do they smoke? Do they masturbate? Do they overeat?"

Hazey

Avid TikTok users may have noted the buzz Liverpool rapper Hazey generated after a brief appearance on one of the platform's biggest rap channels.

His verse bagged him a deal with Sony to release the track in full. The result is 'Packs & Potions', which sees him showing off his furious flow and some brilliantly offbeat football puns for good measure. "Them olders are washed like Sami Khedira," he spits on the track.

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A guide to finding the lesser-spotted Taylor's beers

Whether you're an avid enthusiast or have more of a general interest in the species, our brewery webshop, timothytaylorshop.co.uk now makes it easy to locate our beers, roaming wild in their natural habitat. You can order all of our bottled varieties, our classic and award-winning *Landlord* pale ale, our well-balanced genuine Yorkshire bitter, *Boltmaker*; *Knowle Spring*, the full-bodied and refreshing blonde beer; *Landlord Dark*, the rich yet light dark ale; *Hopical Storm* a modern dry-hopped pale ale, the aromatic and hoppy *Cook Lane IPA*, and the dark and warming *Poulter's Porter*. And they'll wing their way to you with free delivery anywhere in the UK.

All for that taste of Taylor's



VENUE

Ready to KOKO

The iconic Camden venue is primed to rewrite the music gig rulebook

FOLLOWING AN extensive restoration and redevelopment programme costing £70 million by founder Olly Bengough, KOKO in Camden is ready to unveil itself as one of the most ambitious performances spaces the UK has seen in years.

Embracing a long history that has seen it play host to the likes of Charlie Chaplin and Charles Dickens, through to its years as a BBC studio where Monty Python performed and then life as the infamous Camden Palace, the venue has been headlined by greats such as Prince, Amy Winehouse and The Rolling Stones.

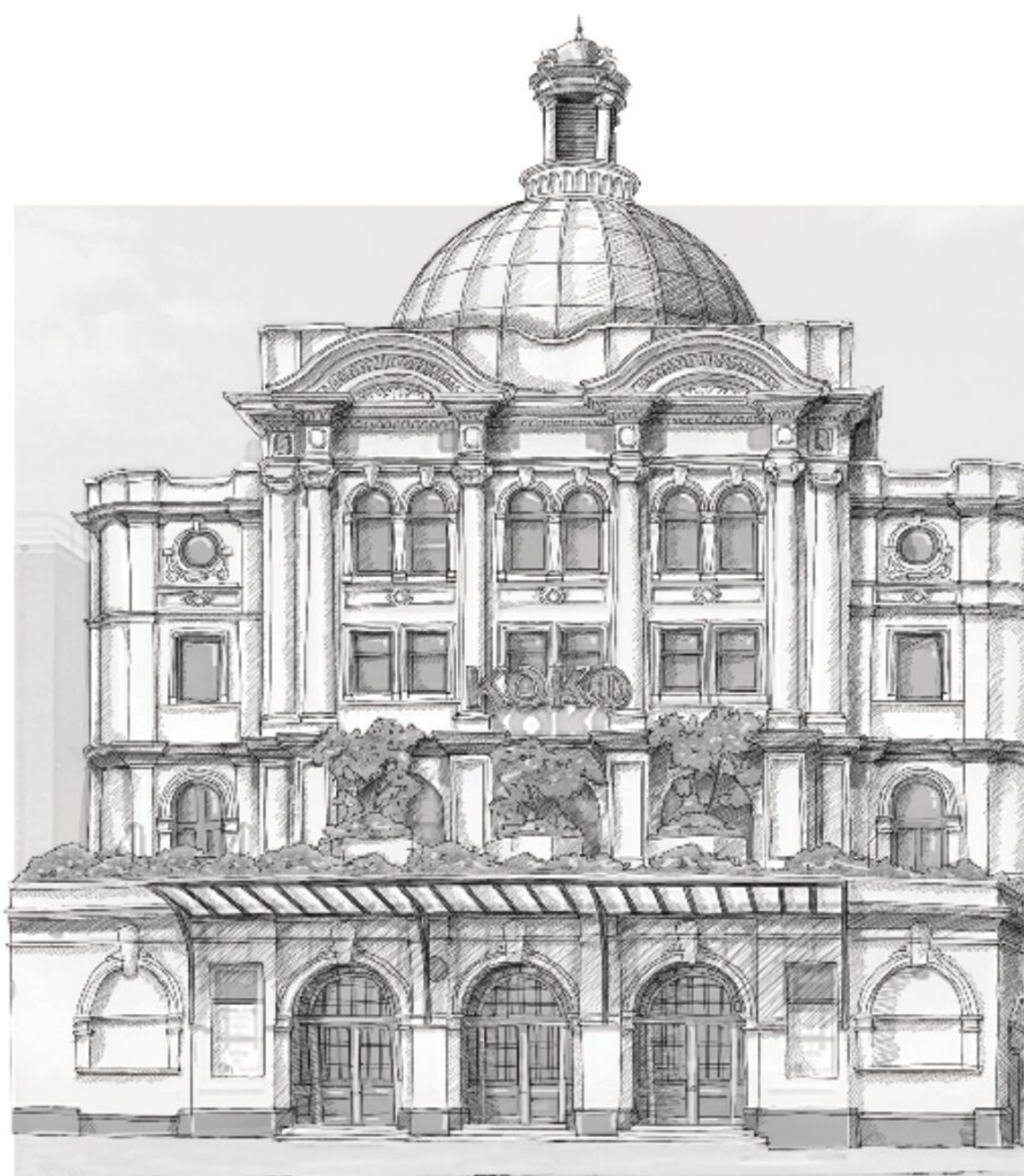
In its new incarnation, it will shift the spotlight to decidedly bespoke experiences. Simultaneously offering a massive 50,000 square feet dedicated to state-of-the-art live music alongside broadcasting facilities – including a radio station and recording studio – its radical rethinking has crafted the ultimate haven for music lovers with spaces catering to intimate gatherings of 40 guests, or a crowd of thousands.

During the refurb, the ceiling above the main theatre stage was removed to reveal the 19th-century Fly Tower complete with original scenography and a glass ceiling to bathe matinée shows in natural daylight, creating a brand-new ‘venue within a venue’ that offers a 360-degree performance space for 200 guests. Shows already billed include Lianne La Havas (9-11 May), Jorja Smith (26 May), Tems (17 & 22 June) and The Beat (3 July). Meanwhile, KOKO Electronic will bring a series of dance events headlined by some of the biggest names from clubland, like Luciano, Jayda G, Todd Terje, Eats Everything, 2manydjs and Kerri Chandler, among too many others to fit in here.

On the ground floor, Café KOKO offers public access, a day-to-night pizzeria, tap bar and a

performance space, while members of the House of KOKO will have exclusive access to a fabulous new roof terrace and conservatory. The reconstructed Dome – intricately brought back to its original design after a fire in January 2020 – will house an intimate cocktail bar. Elsewhere, Ellen’s Jazz Bar and the penthouse studio provide additional show spaces. With private booths for

listening to vinyl records, and enough snugs to disappear into when you simply aspire to a late-night escape – the venue will eventually operate until 6am on most nights – the new KOKO promises a tailored opportunity to enjoy the grandest shows as well as the most intimate performances. There’s no doubt KOKO is putting Camden firmly back on the music map. **R**



▲ PLAY IT AGAIN

A lush piano bar features panelling, comfortable sofas, shutters and an air of past times

◀ FORWARD VISION

It’s taken six years of planning and three years of restoration. Not to mention some £70m pumped into the redevelopment, which has enabled a four-storey upwards extension of the Grade II-listed theatre, as well as an expansion into two adjacent buildings: a former piano factory dating back to 1800, and the old Hope and Anchor pub, which counted Charles Dickens among its local patrons



▲ INTIMATE SPACES

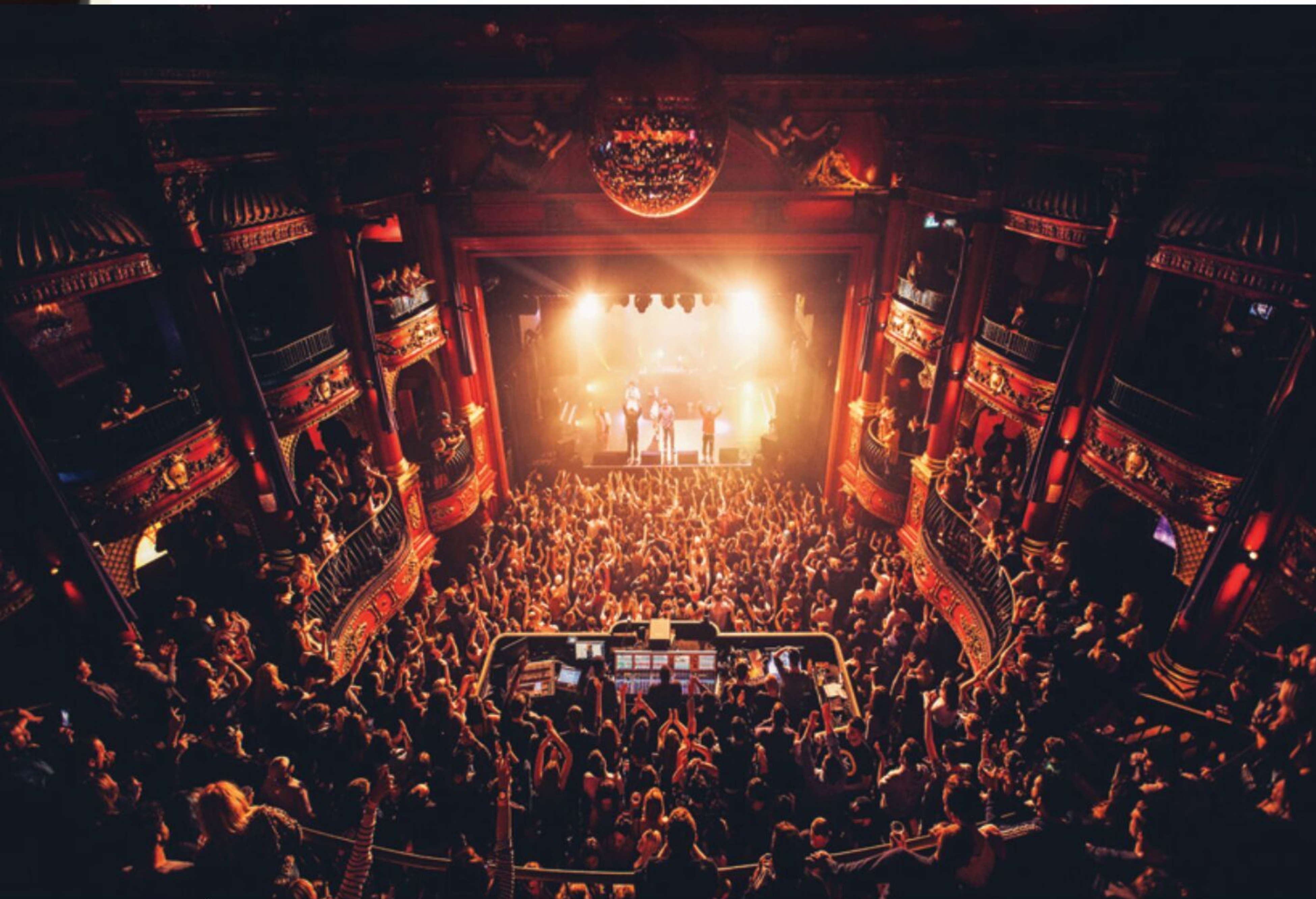
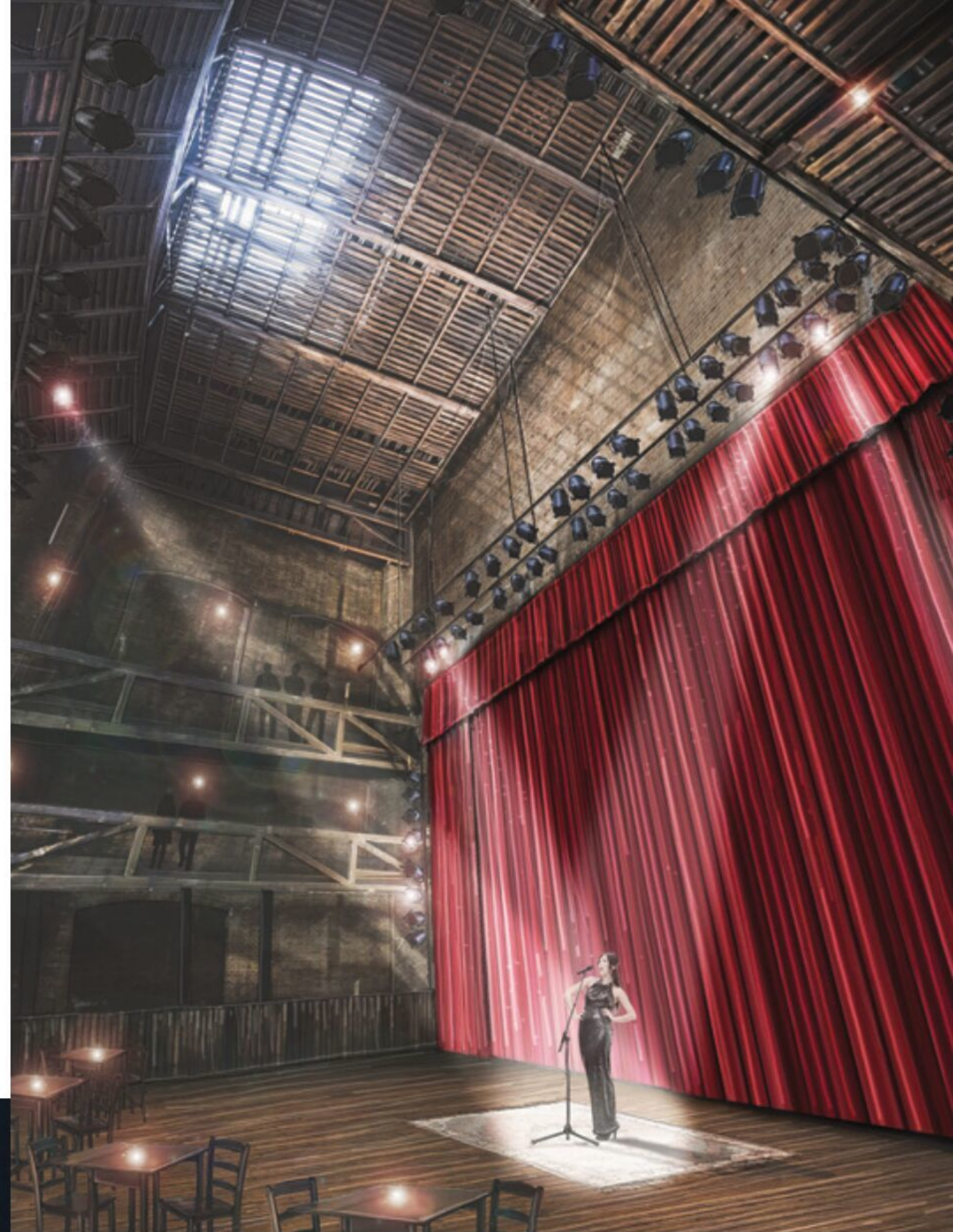
As well as large gig spaces, KOKO offers small, private booths for listening to vinyl records, and plenty of snugs to settle down in — the venue will eventually open until 6am most nights

▼ CROWD PLEASER

The main theatre space — in which the likes of The Rolling Stones, Kanye West and Amy Winehouse have all played — has been restored as the building's primary gig venue

► ON THE FLY

The Fly Tower was discovered during the building work, and makes the most of the large space above the theatre stage, with fans able to watch from an elevated gallery



◀ UP ON THE ROOF

KOKO's membership scheme offers access to exclusive areas including this stunning roof terrace and conservatory

▲ MAN BEHIND THE MUSIC

KOKO's CEO and founder Olly Bengough in the penthouse in The House of KOKO, the club's four-storey offer for members



OPPOSITE: PIRAJEAN LEES; THIS PAGE: TOP LEFT AND BELOW RIGHT, LESLEY LAU; TOP RIGHT AND BELOW LEFT, PIRAJEAN LEES; CENTRE, SAM NEIL

MUSIC

Branching out

As Stockport band Blossoms debut a fresh, new sound on their fourth album, Ribbon Around the Bomb, they also reveal their ambitious future plans

BY NICK REILLY

IT'S LIKE the 70s vomited in here!," jokes Blossoms drummer Joe Donovan.

It's an overcast Wednesday morning in mid February and Blossoms are in high spirits at their rehearsal space and unofficial HQ in Stockport, the Greater Manchester town where the band grew up and where they proudly remain to this day.

From the outside, it appears to be a standard unit on a nondescript industrial estate, located next to a carwash and a garage manned by mechanics who are only too happy to point out the location of their notable neighbours.

But inside, it's an entirely different story. For as Donovan puts it, the main rehearsal room seems every bit as indebted to the 70s as the dancefloor-primed tunes with which Blossoms initially made their name.

Soundproofing panels wrapped in a geometric print adorn the walls while parquet covers the floor. In the midst of this, the band – Donovan, singer Tom Ogden, bassist Charlie Salt, guitarist Josh Dewhurst and keyboardist Myles Kellock – are kicking back on a comfy velvet corner sofa.

It is the kind of setting that Arctic Monkeys singer Alex Turner might have imagined when dreaming up his fictional Tranquility Base Hotel

& Casino, or one that millennials, having discovered Twitter's endless obsession with 70s conversation pits, would lust after.

The lavish rehearsal room is testament to exactly where Blossoms find themselves in 2022. It's a space to call their own after establishing themselves as one of Britain's biggest guitar bands with two No. 1 albums since 2016.

Just as the first three records saw them dabbling in everything from the disco-primed synths of ABBA to the New York funk of Talking Heads, Blossoms' fourth album sees them tackling new ground once more.

In *Ribbon Around the Bomb*, which arrives in April, the group have delivered arguably their most introspective effort yet. It dials down on the synths that featured so abundantly before and instead

offers a sound that wears a love of classic songwriters proudly on its sleeve.

"In the past, what I've listened to has always fed into the songs. I was really into Talking Heads on the last album and it really fed into those songs," Ogden tells Rolling Stone UK.

"But on this one, the songs were just themselves and we could make them sound a little bit like Paul Simon. We've recorded real strings, too, so it's a grander-sounding record."

As well as Simon, Ogden points out that the jaunty charm of recent single 'Ode to New York' has a "bit of a Harry Nilsson thing going on" – the track boasts flitting guitars that are immediately evocative of that singer's storied American songbook.

And as the Big Apple-referencing title of that track suggests, it is also their most observational and, at times, personal record to date.

Ogden had begun writing their fourth album when the pandemic hit and, like most of us, used that time to reflect on life. But in his case, it was the small matter of charting the experiences of four teenage friends from Stockport who had taken on the musical world and won.

"There's a lyric on [album track] 'Visions', which says 'was I complete at 23?' We'd got a No. 1 when I was that age and I'd got with Katie who I'm now married to. Where do you go from there? Our producer James Skelly said, 'That's what the album should be about' – and then everything just started to make sense."

"We basically didn't want to be Blossoms-by-numbers and James really helped with that," Ogden adds of Skelly, who has produced all of the band's records so far.

Elsewhere, an unlikely source of inspiration emerges on 'The Sulking Poet', a track that, according to Salt, is the one that wears its Paul Simon influences most proudly. It also just so happens to be named after a devoted Instagram fan page that Donovan previously discovered.

"I found this Instagram fan page called Ode to Ogden," Donovan explains. "I showed it to Tom because I thought it was really funny, and it had this bio which said, 'here to celebrate the beauty of the sulking poet.'"

So, does Ogden, in the challenging role of being the band's primary songwriter, ever find himself living up to that title?

"Not really with songwriting, but I've been told to smile more over the years," he clarifies. "In most of my photos with fans I've got a face like a slapped arse!"

The record, with its mature progression from 2020's *Foolish Loving Spaces*, is also the mark of a band who are assured in their sound and happy to tweak the

"You have to aspire to achieve something new"

— Ogden



formula that first generated success.

The classic Blossoms knack of delivering catchy pop hooks is still intact, but it speaks volumes that the record is bookended by Bond-esque string arrangements organised by Kellock, who usually delivers those recognisable synths.

"There's an aspect of wanting to challenge people," says Ogden. "You can't please everybody, but it keeps us fresh. Change is good; you can't keep the same thing all the time. You look at what Arctic Monkeys did on their last record, and we look up to them. Being in a band, you have to aspire to achieve something new."

This new-found assuredness, Ogden admits, is a contrast from one of the band's biggest gigs before the pandemic – a huge homecoming show to 15,000 fans at Stockport FC's Edgeley Park

road-test that new confidence at the band's sell-out concert at Manchester Arena last year, which had been delayed due to the pandemic.

While that show was a huge success, the band say it's only the latest step on the path to bigger things. They exclusively hint at plans for a big outdoor show in a Stockport field next year, but die-hard Manchester City fan Donovan says they won't be stopping there.

"There's the Etihad Stadium itself," he says. "When there's local bands like The Courteeners who have been doing shows like that, you just think, 'There's no reason why we can't do gigs like that.' We don't see a ceiling as to where we can get to."

That confident belief in the future's limitless possibilities, you sense, stems in part from the

"We were into the same shit, same area, same upbringing. We're a very tight-knit group"

stadium in 2019. It was supposed to be their moment of crowning glory at that point in their career, but Ogden found himself walking off stage at the end and failing to truly appreciate and enjoy the scale of their achievement.

"We'd just played Stockport County and I wasn't happy," he says. "I remember coming off and analysing it. I was obsessing on perfection and thinking, 'That needs to be better, I was flat there, the crowd looked bored there.' I was driving myself mad off the back of it for all that summer."

The problem deepened, Ogden explains, when he began watching other notable singers perform.

"I just wasn't confident as a frontman. I was comparing myself to other frontmen. I just remember watching The 1975 and thinking, '[Matty Healy]'s a great frontman, but I'm shit.'

"I wasn't, but you beat yourself up. So when we were able to release the last album, I thought, 'This is where I need to be.' Then fucking lockdown hit!"

Ogden was finally able to

evidently strong relationships that exist within the band.

It's partly down to family ties (Ogden is now Donovan's brother-in-law after marrying his sister Katie last summer), but perhaps it's more that they are a group of friends first, and a band second.

"It's the stuff that predates Blossoms," adds Dewhurst. "Going on tour and having these experiences has only solidified that. Everybody had a rapport before Blossoms was a thing. We all knew of each other at least before."

Ogden adds: "There's no real ego in this group, too. You've got to have a bit of an ego but not to the point where it's detrimental. We were into the same shit, same area and similar upbringing. We're a very tight-knit group and we don't let anyone in to poison it."

Or, as Charlie Salt puts it: "There's a really weird frequency running [through] the Stockport water, and we're all on it."

A frequency that, all being well, will continue to blare out for quite some time. From Stockport, to the world. @



**GROWING
TOGETHER**
Friendships
bloomed into
a band



MUSIC

Burning bright

From TikTok star to serious artist, Mimi Webb is on a roll

NEVER UNDERESTIMATE THE power of social media. Fast-rising pop star Mimi Webb would certainly back that statement. The 21-year-old British singer-songwriter blew up on TikTok in 2019 when she sang an a capella version of her debut single ‘Before I Go’ in a restaurant next to her friend, US social media star Charli D’Amelio. More than 20 million views of that clip later – and racking up 85.7 million views of the official single on TikTok a year on – proved the video platform’s reach. Since then, Webb’s breakthrough song ‘Good Without’ and her latest single ‘House On Fire’ have landed in the UK top 10.

There was label interest in Webb before her TikTok successes, so it would do her a disservice to pin luck on the app alone. Webb has been writing songs since she was a 13-year-old diarist, later making good on her ambitions by enrolling at the famed BRIT School and the British Institute of Modern Music. The Canterbury-raised singer honed her craft – namely her impressive, sonorous vocals – over years of grit and determination. TikTok nudged her more into the spotlight.

“It’s been so incredible,” Webb says, speaking ahead of a sold-out headline UK tour show in Newcastle. “Just being able to use social media like that – especially in the pandemic when you couldn’t play shows. I’m so grateful to be able to have that platform, but I also think there’s a fine line of trying to make sure that you become an artist – not a TikTok artist.”

Any misconceptions that Webb’s music is as transient as seconds-long videos were dispelled when she released ‘House On Fire’ in February. A synth-pop track that recalls the punchy pop prowess of Sigrid, the song imagines Webb enacting criminal revenge on a cheating lover.

It’s typical of Webb’s autobiographical songwriting that details young love, heartbreak and empowerment. Does she ever worry about how the subjects of her stories will



react? “Yeah, but also at the end of the day we’re songwriters; we’re gonna write about our experiences. [That song] is definitely a characterisation of me – an experience that’s been dramatised. Obviously I would never actually do that!” she says, chuckling at the image of herself as an arsonist.

The single is lyrically darker than most songs from her 2021 debut EP *Seven Shades Of Heartbreak*. It suggests that an edgier side is to come, such as on EP cut ‘Heavenly’, which hears her wade into minor notes and dirgier sonics. “‘House On Fire’ has got that aggressive, darker

side but it’s still very pop,” says Webb. “I write many songs that have a darker side to them, like ‘Heavenly’”, she says, explaining that the debut album she’s working on has a greater mixture of “vibes” overall. “I feel like it’s going to be Mimi, but grown-up Mimi.”

And she’s in it for the long haul. “Being an artist for me is from now to forever. I just feel like every part of me fits with it perfectly and I can really show my personality through music.” Is she ready to go stratospheric? “Definitely, all the way. World tours, stadiums, awards – the whole shebang.” **CHARLOTTE KROL**



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FESTIVALS

Mud and beer and rock 'n' roll

The UK is home to the best music festival scene in the world, so to celebrate their unique qualities and help you plan your summer, here's our mini festival guide

BY HANNAH EWENS AND NICK REILLY
ILLUSTRATIONS RUSS TUDOR

UNLESS YOU'RE A 'music person' who is intimately acquainted with setting up a tent in a field every year with the sole purpose of listening to bands while downing crate after crate of warm lager, deciding which festival to go to can be a conundrum. Beyond the changing line-ups each summer, the vibe, clientele and customs of each differ immensely. While some cater to kids fresh from college looking for a rager, others draw an older crowd, for whom pulling out a sun hat, wine glass and a camping chair in front of the main stage is the only thing crossing their mind for 72 hours.

Thanks to the explosion of niche and boutique music festivals, the choice is endless. To help you narrow them down, here's the intel on the biggest and best the UK has to offer.



DOWNLOAD

10-12 JUNE

THIS IS YOU: You grew up on Limp Bizkit, Sum 41 and Evanescence and live your best life at alternative club nights with your rock mates once every six months (you're too old and grumpy and married to go out more than that). You go to this festival and this festival only, but you once went to Slipknot's Knotfest and still reminisce about it fondly at the pub. You're not too prissy for camping, but you prefer to be 12 pints of Carlsberg deep before resting your head on that hallowed Donington ground.

MOST LIKELY TO OVERHEAR: Debates about how to split time between stages in order to see the highest number of bands. Also: death metal screams and oink noises.

WHAT YOU NEED TO PACK: Beer, leather jacket and limber up those hands for a weekend of throwing devil horns.



GLASTONBURY

22-26 JUNE

THIS IS YOU: Anyone who likes music and the biggest party on Earth, basically. Part of Glastonbury's brilliance is there's literally something for everyone – whether that's waiting by the Pyramid Stage all day to secure a good spot for Billie Eilish's first headline slot, or letting loose in NYC Downlow until the sun comes up. Worthy Farm has you covered.

MOST LIKELY TO OVERHEAR: Murmured rumours of secret sets that could well end up being the best thing you'll see all weekend. Foals' surprise slot on The Park Stage in 2019 became their unofficial pitch to headline the whole damn thing.

WHAT YOU NEED TO PACK: Wellies, most importantly. Glastonbury hasn't been a wash-out for a fair few years now, but history dictates that Worthy Farm can quickly transform into a swamp when the weather isn't on the festival's side. Don't get caught out.

“Secret sets could well end up being the best thing you'll see all weekend”

WIRELESS

CRYSTAL PALACE: 1-3 JULY

BIRMINGHAM: 8-10 JULY

FINSBURY PARK: 8-10 JULY

THIS IS YOU: You're either a uni student or have the immediate debt of one, thanks to partying and last year's holiday to Ibiza. Your life's motto is 'I'm here for a good time, not a long time'. You love a wide range of music genres, but particularly hip-hop, rap and grime.

MOST LIKELY TO OVERHEAR: A high-pitched hissing noise.

WHAT YOU NEED TO PACK: Nothing. This is an in-and-out job, one where you look a million dollars and could hypothetically be one of the performers. If you need to bring a glam team and MUA that's on you.

“Your life's motto is 'I'm here for a good time, not a long time'”



SECRET GARDEN PARTY

21-24 JULY

THIS IS YOU: If you're not crusty enough for Boomtown, too indie for the Isle of Wight Festival and miss the original Bestival, Secret Garden Party is probably a comfortable fit for you. The idea of spending a weekend in a forest filled with fairy lights and papier-mâché statues fills you with warm glee. You've also seen the big pond with the boats on someone's Instagram and want a piece of that action for your own grid.

MOST LIKELY TO OVERHEAR: “Do you feel it yet?”

WHAT YOU NEED TO PACK: Glitter, colourful outfits and both a sense of adventure and a degree of chill.



GREEN MAN

18-21 AUGUST

THIS IS YOU: A true music lover who relies on 6Music recommendations to inform their musical tastes. If there's the slightest hint of shouty, spoken-word sermons against the government or ambient tales of emotional break-ups delivered by a meek North American songwriter, you're all over it.

MOST LIKELY TO OVERHEAR: Rave reviews about a set from an upcoming south London pub scene band. That, or countless recommendations for the vegan acai berry bowl stall.

WHAT YOU NEED TO PACK: A rucksack full of musical know-it-all-ism.

“Shouty sermons against the government? You're all over it”

READING & LEEDS

26-28 AUGUST

THIS IS YOU: You've just completed school/college and are now looking forward to three days of letting loose out of sight of your parents.

MOST LIKELY TO OVERHEAR: Whichever TV catchphrase is current, shouted very loudly and to the point of irritation. Those in their late twenties will remember endless shouts of “ALAN!”, while a younger crowd may recall “Shalom Jackie” — thanks for that, *Friday Night Dinner*.

WHAT YOU NEED TO PACK: A crate of lager, a bottle of luminous booze your body will almost instantly reject and a truly inadequate amount of food.



THE BEST OF THE REST

In It Together Festival

3-5 JUNE

THIS IS YOU: You plan your festivals (and life) around The Kids, so this family-friendly party in the Welsh valleys is screaming your name. A musical chameleon, you're as happy listening to Noel Gallagher as raving to Armand Van Helden.

MOST LIKELY TO OVERHEAR: Thick Welsh accents and a healthy dose of patriotism.

WHAT YOU NEED TO PACK: A positive mental attitude and plenty of it — this is likely to be the best lesser-known festival of the summer.

El Dorado Festival

30 JUNE - 3 JULY

THIS IS YOU: Someone who lives to party and has spent the past two years wondering when you'll be able to get back in a field somewhere with like-minded souls.

MOST LIKELY TO OVERHEAR: Nothing. With the amount of sheer DJs and producers on offer, we doubt you'll be able to hear much over their ear-splitting sets.

WHAT YOU NEED TO PACK: Enough party-starting spirit to last you an entire weekend and whatever you need to survive the adult-size ball pit...

Cornbury Festival

8-10 JULY

THIS IS YOU: A wholesome family person who likes nothing more than a pint of cider while listening to a Spotify playlist titled “something for everyone”.

MOST LIKELY TO OVERHEAR: This is the last ever Cornbury Festival, so don't be surprised to hear the boasts of long-time attendees about how they saw the likes of Amy Winehouse, Paul Simon, The Faces in the past. We're well jel.

WHAT YOU NEED TO PACK: Sun cream for the kids, straw hats for Mum and Dad, collapsible fishing chair so you can pitch up and watch Bryan Adams in comfort.

Field Day

20 AUGUST

THIS IS YOU: An inner-city raver who loves nothing more than a full day of partying, safe in the knowledge that your own bed awaits at the end of it.

MOST LIKELY TO OVERHEAR: People gagging in disbelief at the stellar quality of the line-up — from The Chemical Brothers to Kraftwerk, it's a tribute to dance music.

WHAT YOU NEED TO PACK: Nothing! That's the beauty of a city festival, located in east London's Victoria Park.

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Can Labour Win Again with Young People Disillusioned?

Without the empathetic draw of Jeremy Corbyn or inspiring left-wing ideals, the Labour Party is in trouble. Its success – and the future of British politics – will be defined by what its youth, Generation Left, does next

BY SIMON CHILDS

FOR HEATHER MCINTOSH, the result of the 2019 general election was like “a really bad breakup, because I’d wake up every morning and have this moment where I hadn’t remembered that it had happened – and then that it had – and I would cry and be so sad. It was genuinely awful.”

During the 2017 and 2019 election campaigns, McIntosh was one of the many millennials who spent hours knocking on doors trying to convince people to vote Labour. Now she’s not even sure if she would vote for them again. How did we get to this point?

A young adult in Britain today hit puberty around the time George W Bush declared “mission accomplished” in Iraq in 2003, sat their

A levels some time around the financial crash and entered the job market during the Coalition government’s brutal austerity programme, while the apocalypse of climate change awareness slowly emerged in the background.

The politically minded will have watched a million people march against the Iraq war in 2003, only for the conflict to finally end in 2011. Closer to home, there was plenty more to remember about that year: Occupy took over Wall Street and the City of London in the name of social and economic equality and “real global democracy”, riots broke out in British cities, and UK Uncut picketed corporations to demand that they pay their fair share of taxes. The pessimists will have noted that not much has changed in the intervening ten years.

This is what Keir Milburn, a lecturer in political economy and organisation at the University of Leicester, has termed ‘Generation Left’. The idea is not the cliché that young people are idealistic lefties who will grow old and bitter and conservative in good time. It’s that people who became adults around the time of the financial crash have a shared experience of capitalism – of stagnant wages, burnout, not being able to afford a house and so on – and a set of cultural values which make them a coherent political group with a mutual interest in challenging neoliberalism and conservatism.

For Jamila Squire, now 24, growing up watching an increasingly disastrous set of world events and a succession of seemingly failed



protest movements “created this sense that it wasn’t possible to create any kind of change, and that people were banging their heads against the wall and Westminster just didn’t care”.

This generation smashed the Conservative Party HQ during the 2010 Millbank riot in protest at the coalition government’s increase in tuition fees to £9,000 per year, occupied universities and formed the ‘Black Bloc’ that rampaged through London in 2011 – or they watched their older siblings and waited until they were old enough to join in.

The anti-austerity movement ultimately failed. So, when an ageing leftist backbencher who did not support austerity, opposed the Iraq War, and even claimed just £8.70 for ink cartridges on his expenses form one year became the leader of the Labour Party, it provided a new, more formal focal point for young activists. Membership of the Labour Party ballooned from around 200,000 in 2015 under the leadership of Ed Miliband, to over half a million in 2016 under Corbyn.

“I think the promise of Corbynism wasn’t just that there were left-wing policies,” says Squire. “I think it was the sense that he genuinely believed that anyone had the potential to be extraordinary and to create change, and he was really interested in listening to people.”

“I feel very hurt and betrayed by the Labour Party”

Corbyn’s leadership was a lightning rod for like-minded people for whom mainstream Westminster politics had previously held little appeal. “It suddenly seemed like there were all of these people that believed these things and they didn’t exist before, but that obviously wasn’t true,” says McIntosh. “There were so

many people that must have thought in this way – there was just suddenly, like, a mass group that then represented it and you could actually put a name to it.”

Jess Barnard, chair of Young Labour, was part of Labour before its youth-quake. She joined the party in 2012, when Ed Miliband was Labour leader. She remembers being the youngest person in meetings at that time “by, like, 20 years”. It was, she says, “quite a static party”. The wave of enthusiasm around Jeremy Corbyn changed all that. “You’d be able to meet up with a number of other young members in the pub beforehand, and then go to the meeting together, which is something that we didn’t have before. Oh my gosh, it was brilliant.”

Helped by an army of activists, in 2017, Corbyn’s Labour Party shocked political pundits and pollsters who predicted total wipe-out. Labour gained 30 seats and their biggest vote share since 2001, forcing the Tories to form a minority government.

But in 2019, weighed down by infighting, an incoherent position on Brexit, the aggressive right-wing media, and an anti-Semitism scandal, the wheels fell off. Boris Johnson's Tories romped home with a landslide and the biggest share of the popular vote any party had won since 1979 – largely thanks to the votes of the property-owning boomer generation. The young had mostly voted Labour, but even Corbyn's biggest supporters had to admit that their electoral project had failed. Corbyn announced the next day that he would not lead the party into another election.

In the subsequent Labour leadership campaign, in order to win the votes of left-wing activists, Keir Starmer mimicked the outgoing Labour leader, heavily implying continuity with the Corbyn project – but without the electoral kryptonite that Corbyn carried with him. After winning, Starmer soon began to mirror Tory tropes, pledging a strategy of flag-waving patriotism. Many on the left began to feel that they had been sold a dummy.

To add to the acrimonious atmosphere, a dossier of emails and WhatsApp messages was leaked, showing how right-wing Labour Party hacks had worked against Corbyn's chances of victory. One senior official, on seeing the exit poll for the 2017 election showing surprisingly good results for Labour, said it was "opposite to what I had been working towards for the last couple of years".

"I feel very hurt and betrayed by the Labour Party," says McIntosh. "Seeing, like, the gleam of what it could be. How that was sabotaged, what it is now."

All of this leaves the question of what Generation Left does next.

Many of the friends who went to the pub with Barnard have now left the party; in particular, LGBTQ+ and Muslim members who don't feel listened to by the new leadership about the oppression they face, says Barnard. Just over a year after Starmer's election as party leader, Labour was losing members at the rate of 250 a day. As a result, "It's lost its spark," she says.

Barnard is working on helping young people get involved with the party, but admits Labour is not always a fun place for that generation to be.

Although the coronavirus pandemic would take the zap out of an electric chair, Barnard thinks her local party made its regular Zoom meetings more uninviting for young activists than necessary. "You couldn't unmute yourself and they turned off the chat function, so you couldn't even type something."

"It feels like the leadership is trying to prove that the adults are back in charge and we're all very serious. And it's kind of missing the point. We were all really serious about the problems we're facing and serious about winning power, but we just wanted to do things differently and show that ordinary people can organise for change."

In 2021, Young Labour had to host a rally



INTO THE SWING

Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn hits the election campaign trail in Telford, Shropshire in 2017, two days before the party gained 30 seats, the largest increase in Labour's vote share since 1945

outside of the main party conference, after party officials tried to block one of their invited speakers: Jeremy Corbyn.

"We exist in society where a lot of the time we are being dismissed or we are being disproportionately blamed. You read it in the press, you experience it at work, you experience it from union members or your own family, and you hear it from the government when it

"Generation Left, the people who became adults around the time of the financial crash, have a shared experience of capitalism – of stagnant wages, burnout, not being able to afford a house"

imposes policies that harm younger people. So if you're experiencing all of this in your daily life, it's very hard to then go into [a] space with the resilience to say, 'I'm gonna experience this again, I'm not going to give up,'" she says.

Why put up with this when you could get involved in climate activism, attend a BLM march, or simply drop out of political activism, get into crypto or do whatever else with your one brief life on this planet? For many, there isn't an answer.


McIntosh threw herself into a mutual aid group helping vulnerable neighbours during the Covid

lockdowns and has attended protests against the government's Police and Crime Bill – a heavy-handed crackdown on the right to protest – and still believes in making change from the grass roots up. "I think if we keep looking above for change to happen, from whoever's in Parliament or leading the Labour Party – I have no faith in that, but I have faith in other people."

But others see deserting Labour as giving the enemy what they want. Most of Squire's political friends are still party members. "I think there's a collective sense that it would be a victory for the [right-wing side of the] party if we were all to leave," she says. "That's definitely what they want, because having a huge left-wing membership does make their lives quite difficult."

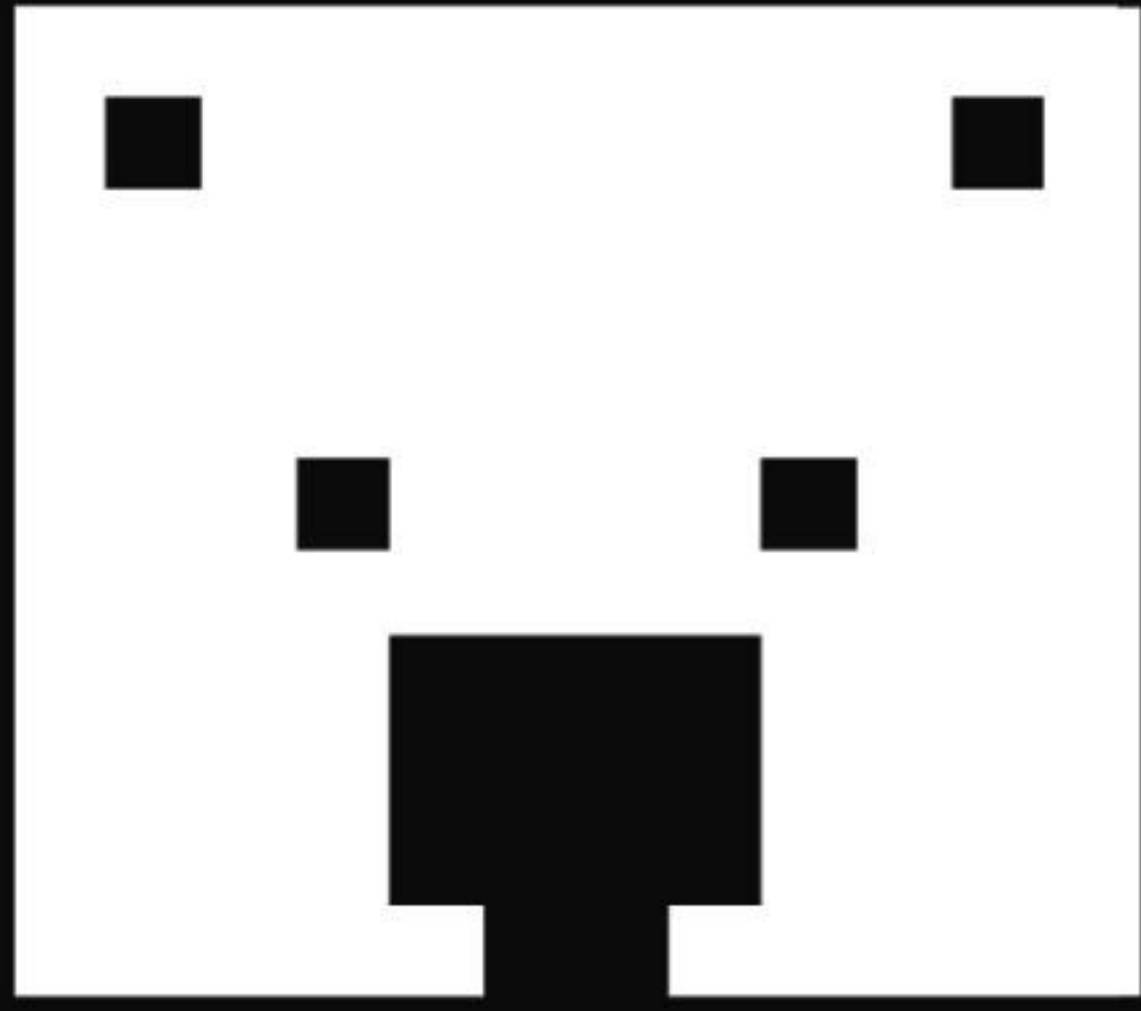
She's determined that the movement doesn't fall apart, whether or not people stay in the party. "I don't necessarily know what the right answer is, but I feel like there was a coalition around Corbynism and for that to split and not have any kind of vehicle for communication would be a total disaster."

The current Labour leadership appears more interested in appealing to older, more conservative voters in a way that can sometimes place them at odds with the more socially liberal young. Even if it does work, winning elections by placating boomers is a strategy with a definite best-before date. In the meantime, Generation Left could turn to the Green Party, reach for the ejector button by backing independence movements in Scotland and Wales, or turn their attention back to direct-action politics as seen in the rise of Extinction Rebellion.

Generation Left is licking its wounds for now, but the question of where its energy goes next will define the politics of the coming decades. 

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Has Privatisation Failed The UK?

From energy companies to the travel network and the creeping privatisation of the NHS, Obsidian Adebayo asks whether Margaret Thatcher's vision of a competitive Britain has built a better nation

WHETHER OR NOT privatisation has failed Britain is something I often find myself wondering about. I studied economics and had a subsequent career in finance, so you might assume that I'd think that it's working perfectly fine. After all, a career in investment banking isn't exactly anti-capitalist in nature. However, the theory and the experience of living in a capitalist society are poles apart.

Even I can admit, as somebody coming from a poor socioeconomic background who is Black, queer and non-binary, that although capitalism has been part of what has enabled me access into privilege, it has also been a huge part of what makes everyday life difficult. Not just for me, but for way too many British people who are not only trying to access basic amenities of water, electricity and a roof over their heads, but also in our modern society, requiring access to the internet, banking and affordable transport.

Growing up in Luton and studying in Bedford in the early 00s meant that I regularly used what was then called the First Capital Connect train service, which is now managed by Govia

Thameslink. Anybody familiar with this route will be no stranger to persistent delays and overcrowding, as well as limited alternative options. As a young child, I often found myself waiting for a train that was delayed by hours or cancelled entirely, which meant being alone until dangerously late into the night for my

“Economic growth is for nought if it doesn't result in increased wealth and decreased inequality”

immigrant parents to finish their low-paid jobs and pick me up.

Growing up under a Blair government and being so young, I had no idea why this was the case, believing of course in the equality of opportunity and that if my parents were simply rich enough and if I worked hard enough, I wouldn't have to get the train at all! This lack of awareness, of

course, came from me being completely ignorant of the history behind the lack of options in the first place and what was driving the increasingly unaffordable costs for my family.

Later, in my early adulthood, studying at university in London and discovering the entirely different experience that is Transport for London, I was blown away by the myriad choices available and the affordability and ease of getting around the city. It wasn't until then that I began to contemplate what the benefit of the privatisation of the rail network was, when compared to a publicly run system such as the London Underground.

IT'S HARD TO pinpoint when exactly privatisation in Britain started, but it became a central pillar of British economic policy under Margaret Thatcher's government when the Conservatives came into power in 1979.

Before then, the Labour government arranged the sale of some of the state's shareholding in British Petroleum, but it was by no means predicated on the belief that state-owned industries should be privatised;



POST
OFFICE





FIGHTING FOR THEIR RIGHTS

Protesters in Manchester in February, part of a demonstration demanding emergency action to fund the National Health Service, including £20 billion to save lives over the winter, a fully publicly owned NHS and pay increases for staff

rather it was a result of budgetary pressures at the time.

The philosophical shift within British government that state-owned industries should be privatised and left to the free markets has rightly been attributed to the Conservative Party. It was a dogma pushed and held by Thatcher, in particular.

The Conservatives in opposition, led by Thatcher, had long been calling for a denationalisation effort. She had been heavily influenced by the 1977 Ridley Report, written by right-wing Conservative MP Nicholas Ridley, a founding member of the Selsdon Group of free market Conservatives. In this report he proposed that a denationalisation or privatisation strategy was the best way to take on trade unions and prevent miners' strikes, which many in the Conservative Party felt were detrimental to profitable business and the economy at large. It was also, of course, fundamentally politically driven, as trade unionists were major backers of the Labour government, hence it was a way to destabilise that voting bloc, too.

The Conservatives called this "popular capitalism": in a speech by Thatcher in 1986 she insisted that worldwide, privatisation was enfranchising citizens. With this argument she positioned the party as one that was truly for the people, insisting that privatisation was a way to return power back to the individual, rather than to keep it in government hands. This, of

course, is also known as economic liberalism, a theory advocated by Friedrich August von Hayek, who, after meeting Thatcher in 1975, was able to convince her of the ideas outlined in his book, *The Constitution of Liberty*, which Thatcher famously espoused as the foundation of the Conservative Party doctrine.

To give some context of Hayek's views, he

"On most train routes there is only one choice, and that choice has only been getting more expensive. The situation fundamentally undermines the concept of a competitive market"

was a supporter of the Institute of Economic Affairs, where free market campaigner Linda Whetstone was a trustee. At the Conservative conference in 1978, in front of Thatcher, no less, he gave a speech saying: "The next Conservative government must not pander or protect certain sectors. Let's not go out of our way to help small

businesses, agriculture trade unions, coloured people, women." It was a telling speech, which also coincided with the poignant anti-immigration focus of Thatcher during that period.

According to her and other proponents of economic classical liberalism or 'Thatcherism', as the media dubbed it at the time, privatisation would mean greater freedom of choice for people and was inherently linked to morality. Thatcher proclaimed that every citizen should have the fundamental right of freedom of choice and that the only way to do this was to decrease government intervention in free markets, and to denationalise and also disempower unions, who were seen as obstructive to business profitability and economic growth. Privatisation was the main way to increase wealth of the individual, she and the Conservative Party claimed.

A central argument of theirs was that in the hands of the Labour government, strategic important assets such as British Telecom and British Gas would be renationalised, therefore taking away the opportunity for the private citizen to have shares in them. This was attractive on the face of it, but of course, in practice, it was far from giving power and access to all – only the privileged few who could afford to buy shares would benefit.

Back then, at least, I'd say you'd be forgiven for believing her. After all, there was genuine mismanagement of these industries by previous

governments, although it must be said that privatisation hasn't remedied this. Furthermore, the idea of decentralising power is very attractive, too. Why wouldn't the average person, watching the privileged few, as well as government officials, be encouraged by the idea that they too could increase their wealth through hard work?

Unfortunately, this is not what happened. Instead, what we saw was rife unemployment which more than doubled from around 1.5 million at the time Thatcher came into power in 1979, to over 3 million in just five years in 1984, resulting in the highest joblessness rate in post-war history, and far above some of the highest current estimates for unemployment likely to be caused by Covid-19.

Inequality also increased under her policies: by 1991 when she left office, the gap between the richest and poorest had hit a record high. Social inequality was damaging groups ranging from working-class coal miners to the LGBTQ+ community.

As for choice, one need look no further than what has happened to the rail system in the UK. I'm sure I'm not alone in bearing the brunt of inflation-busting increases in train fare costs over the years, not to talk of approximately £10 billion the government has shouldered to bail out the industry during the pandemic.

Where private operators have monopolies, on most routes there is only one choice, and that has only become more expensive. The situation fundamentally undermines the concept of a competitive market. Furthermore, the main argument of increased efficiency has not actually materialised; the government setting a target of 75 per cent of costs recovered from passengers has only been achieved once since privatisation, compared to several times beforehand.

So, what does this all mean? Well, it indicates that it isn't just the argument for privatisation that is empirically weak, but the lived experience of so many, including myself, demonstrates that it isn't the silver bullet it's often purported to be. In fact, the reality is much more nuanced and the sensitivity of each industry and its role in our society should be taken into account when considering if its privatisation would be of real benefit to British society.

An industry that acts as a clear example of how important it is to the wellbeing of our society, whose plight has only been made more acute through this recent Covid pandemic, is the National Health Service. Its backdoor privatisation has been well documented in mainstream media. Millions including myself have very real experiences of being left on extremely long waiting lists for access to services including mental health or even the Gender Identity Development Service, which has a years-long waiting list and a backlog numbering in the thousands. I have been privileged enough to be able to access some care privately, but this is out of reach for a large proportion of British people.

This is not to say that the public management

of the NHS is without its problems, of course. However, the introduction of the internal market and the private finance initiative, in particular, have actually amplified issues that the public management of the NHS has been criticised for. Costs of financing hospitals are much higher now than they would have been if they could access government financing and, far from encouraging more efficiency, the internal market has actually resulted in more bureaucracy.

These are surely extremely negative impacts, which bring the entire argument for the privatisation of such societally important industries into disrepute. After experiencing the pandemic, I have a new-found appreciation for how much strain the NHS has been under. The lack of access to PPE, the disproportionate impact on frontline staff such as nurses, as well as the



POINTING THE WAY

Margaret Thatcher views the former Britannia Steelworks site with, left to right, Ron Norman, Duncan Hall and Nicholas Ridley

inability of the NHS to withstand the demand for services outside of Covid, impacted such key core services as cancer treatment.

Many government officials have argued that this was unforeseeable and largely due to Covid, but the strain on the NHS due to underinvestment over the past decade was clearly forewarned by experts, academics and health professionals alike. If the aim of privatising elements of the NHS was to ensure better provision of services, then it is very clearly failing in this regard.

I'm sure you're wondering, as have I, what the alternative could possibly be? After all, many of these industries have already been privatised, or are well on their way to being so. In my opinion, there are a few routes ahead.

I am not entirely confident in the ability of our current government to manage making industries such as rail or utilities public again, but I do think that a review of how privatisation

is being conducted is of paramount importance. It doesn't make sense for the government to pursue a very basic, blanket approach to all industries, based on outdated economic ideas that did not consider an increasingly diverse, technologically driven modern society.

Perhaps there is something to learn from the other nations that Thatcher listed as following the lead of Britain in pursuing popular capitalism. For example, in France, Électricité de France is still majority-owned by the government. This has resulted in electricity remaining largely affordable for French citizens, rather than the extremely negative impact increased prices are having on British households.

Another nation Thatcher highlighted is Singapore. The UK could learn from its foray into the privatisation of the rail system and the resulting failure, which has triggered genuine public discourse on renationalising the system. The executive chairman of Banyan Tree Holdings, Ho Kwon Ping, who is not an advocate of renationalisation, admitted that the nature in which Singapore's public transport system was privatised may have gone too far and that Hong Kong is an example of privatisation that has worked better in practice. Its Mass Transit Railway system has been dubbed one of the best in the world and is publicly run, alongside private options such as trams.

Here the government provides a key service that it recognises as central to a well-functioning modern society, while not excluding the provision of alternative private options, which allows for freedom of choice, and does not dampen competition to the detriment of its citizens.

Ultimately, the route ahead is far from clear, but I genuinely believe that it's of paramount importance that we ask ourselves if choice as an end in itself is what is most important. Or is a system in which everyone, regardless of their background, is able to access core services at an affordable price preferential? How hard you work (or not), or the size of your pay packet should not govern whether you can access basic amenities – be they water, energy, communications or transport – that are essential to modern living. It should be a clear right. Equitable access should come before shareholder profit.

That is, at the very least, the Britain I grew up believing in and the Britain I would love to see us all thrive in. Whether it's through capitalist or social models, or a mixture of both, the barometer by which we measure the success of these approaches should be driven by whether everybody has easy and affordable access to the essentials for an acceptable standard of living.

Ultimately, economic growth is for nought if it doesn't result in increased wealth and decreased inequality. What better way to make sure that we grow sustainably, than ensuring that everybody has the basic human right of access to core services. It's in everyone's interest for these areas to prosper in a way that's truly fair and equitable for all. @

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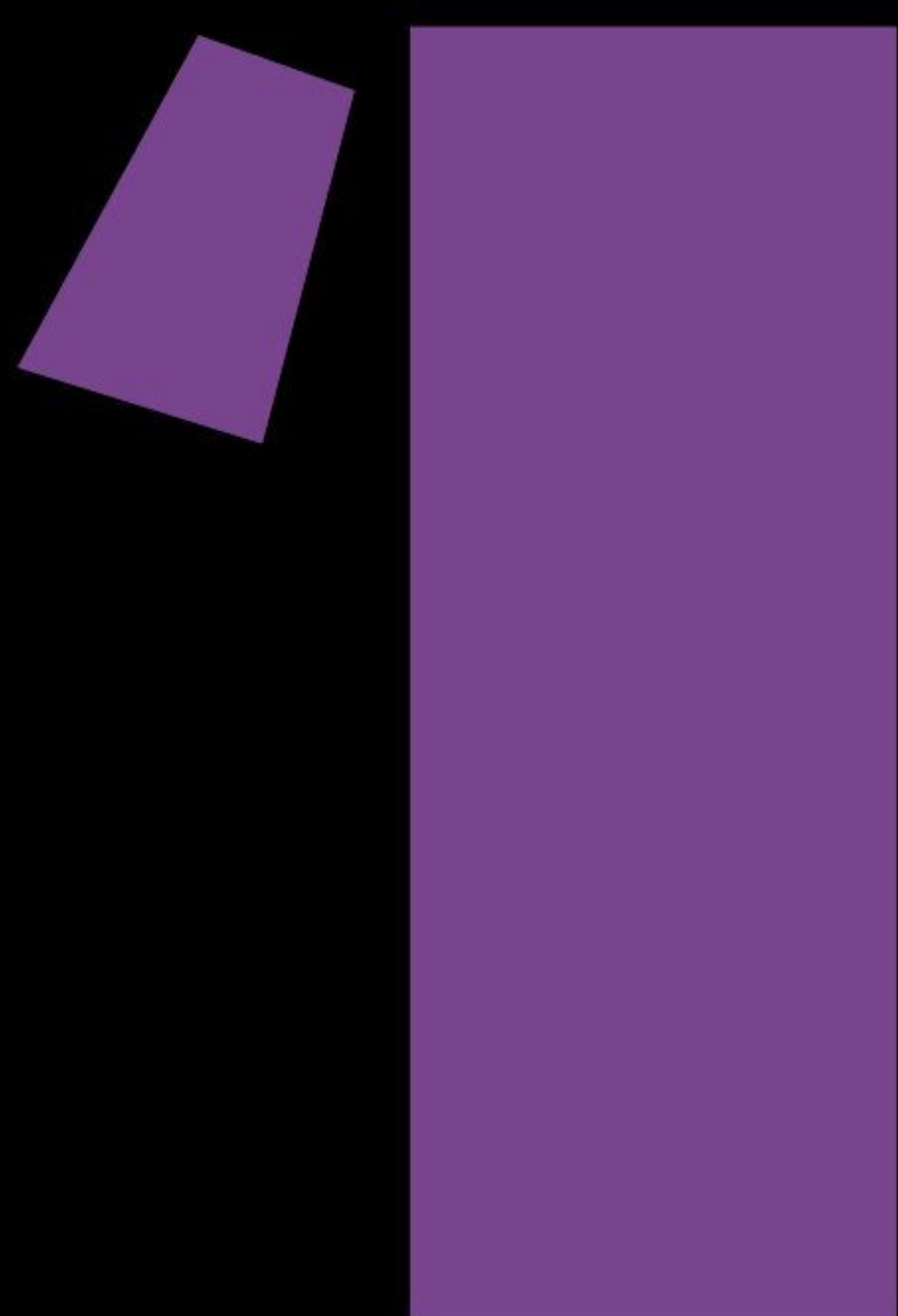


BURNA WEARS TROUSERS AND JACKET, BOTH BY TIWHO, JEWELLERY THROUGHOUT, ARTIST'S OWN

RISE OF THE AFRICAN GIANT

The Nigerian superstar Burna Boy now has the attention of music fans across the globe. In his first interview after a brief, self-imposed break and with new music on the horizon, he reintroduces himself as the complex character he has always been

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STYLING **RONAMI OGULU**



MIGHT DECIDE TO NOT drop an album for a long time. In fact, you know what, no album till further notice,” read the September 2021 Instagram story from the man who had spent the previous three years lining the charts with singles. The announcement, though disappointing, was almost expected. But six months after confirming his full-length absence, Burna Boy’s album mode has been reactivated.

I’ve been on a Zoom call for almost an hour, patiently waiting for Burna Boy – the 30-year-old Damini Ogulu – to appear. When a baritone “hello” comes, I’m surprised: I’ve been trying to pin down the Nigerian Afrobeats star all week. It’s our fourth attempt to speak after the previous three were rescheduled – never mind his Rolling Stone UK photo shoot that began in Lagos, relocated to London, and then, at the 11th hour, shifted back to Lagos so that Burna Boy could carry out reshoots for the video of his new single.

I’ve been briefed that Burna Boy is not in a good mood. I have also been instructed not to talk about cars, relationships or to make any comparisons to other artists. But I do have the green light to talk about his pets and the music. I lead with the latter – and quickly realise my error.

“You don’t know that!” Burna Boy challenges me when I ask about a forthcoming new album, his tone warning that “album mode” means he’s cooking. As Burna Boy repeats, you don’t know his plans. He’s confident in that because *he* doesn’t even know his plans. When I bring up the new single – which I am assured will be public knowledge by the time you read this – Burna Boy is equally as incredulous in his response, asking me, “Which single?”

before he is cut off by Bukola Sawyerr-Izeogu, his public relations manager. (In the industry, she’s known as Buki HQ, after her eponymous media relations consultancy firm, Buki HQ Media.) With the microphone on mute, Buki HQ explains to Burna Boy the larger team’s plans, which include the imminent release of ‘Jagale’.

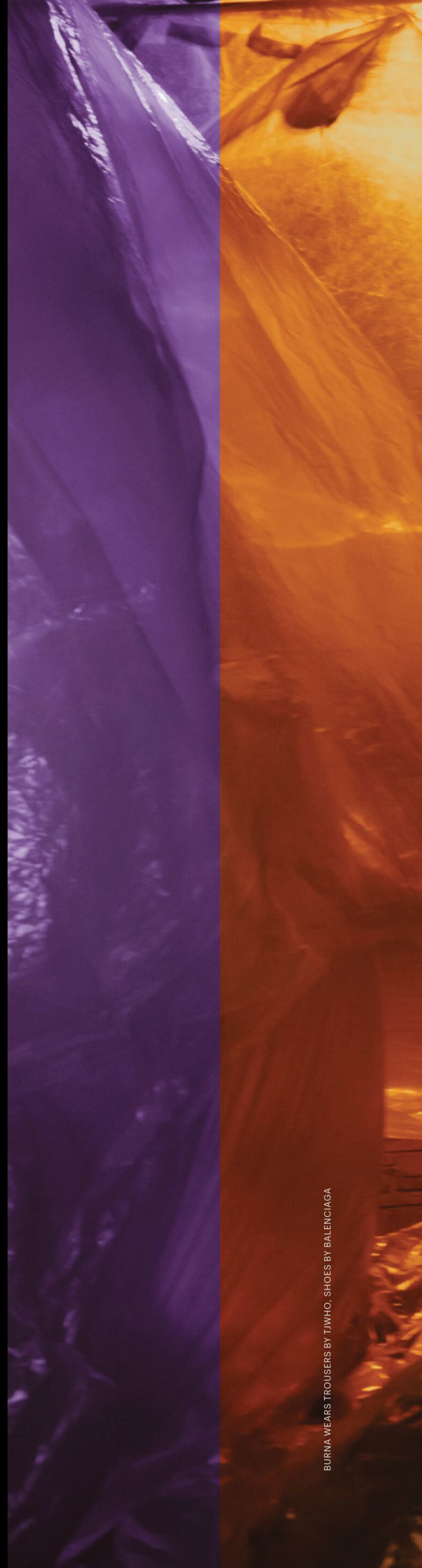
“Yeah, so the new single,” Burna Boy says with a laugh that assuages my fear that my question would lead to yet another rescheduling. He continues: “I’m just trying to be positive and have fun with it, you know?”

EACH ALBUM HAS served a different purpose for Burna Boy. On his 2013 debut, *L.I.F.E*, it’s in the title. *Leaving an Impact For Eternity* was a projection of his legacy before he had even begun. The opening track of the record introduced us to the emerging artist through the now-infamous melody “*They call me, they call me, they call me Burna Boy*,” as a female voice states the purpose of the whole tape, singing: “*it’s my life, my life*”. The largely triumphant project featured the Afropop stars of that generation: M.I Abaga, Olamide, Wizkid and Tface (now 2Baba) and, more importantly, set Burna Boy up as the newest sensation on the scene.

L.I.F.E’s 2015 successor, *On a Spaceship*, is markedly more chaotic. We learned of the nascent artist’s bad-boy reputation. “*You can’t have all that and have a peaceful career*,” Osagz, the controversial Nigerian media executive, proclaims on ‘Intro’. Around the time of this record’s release, Burna Boy was on Twitter threatening to kill bloggers who wrote critically about him and his work, while rumours spread of his involvement in gang violence.

More recently, Burna Boy’s tirades – such as the immortalised ‘African Giant’ rant in retaliation to his small font billing on the 2019 Coachella lineup; his relentless repetition of his dubitable grass-to-grace story; and his political virtue-signalling through claiming to be the best thing since Fela Anikulapo-Kuti, arguably Nigeria’s most politically conscious musician – are interpreted with some level of virtue, their largely Afrocentric messaging earning interest from progressive media including Apple Music’s *The Ebro Show*, *NME*, *The Fader* and the *Evening Standard*.

Burna Boy’s feuds with various artists – including fellow Afropop frontrunner, Davido, South African rapper and former collaborator, AKA, or even Ghanaian hitmaker Shatta Wale earlier this year – are quickly discarded in favour of the ‘passionate advocate for Black pride and empowerment’ narrative that



BURNA WEARS TROUSERS BY TFWHO, SHOES BY BALENCIAGA



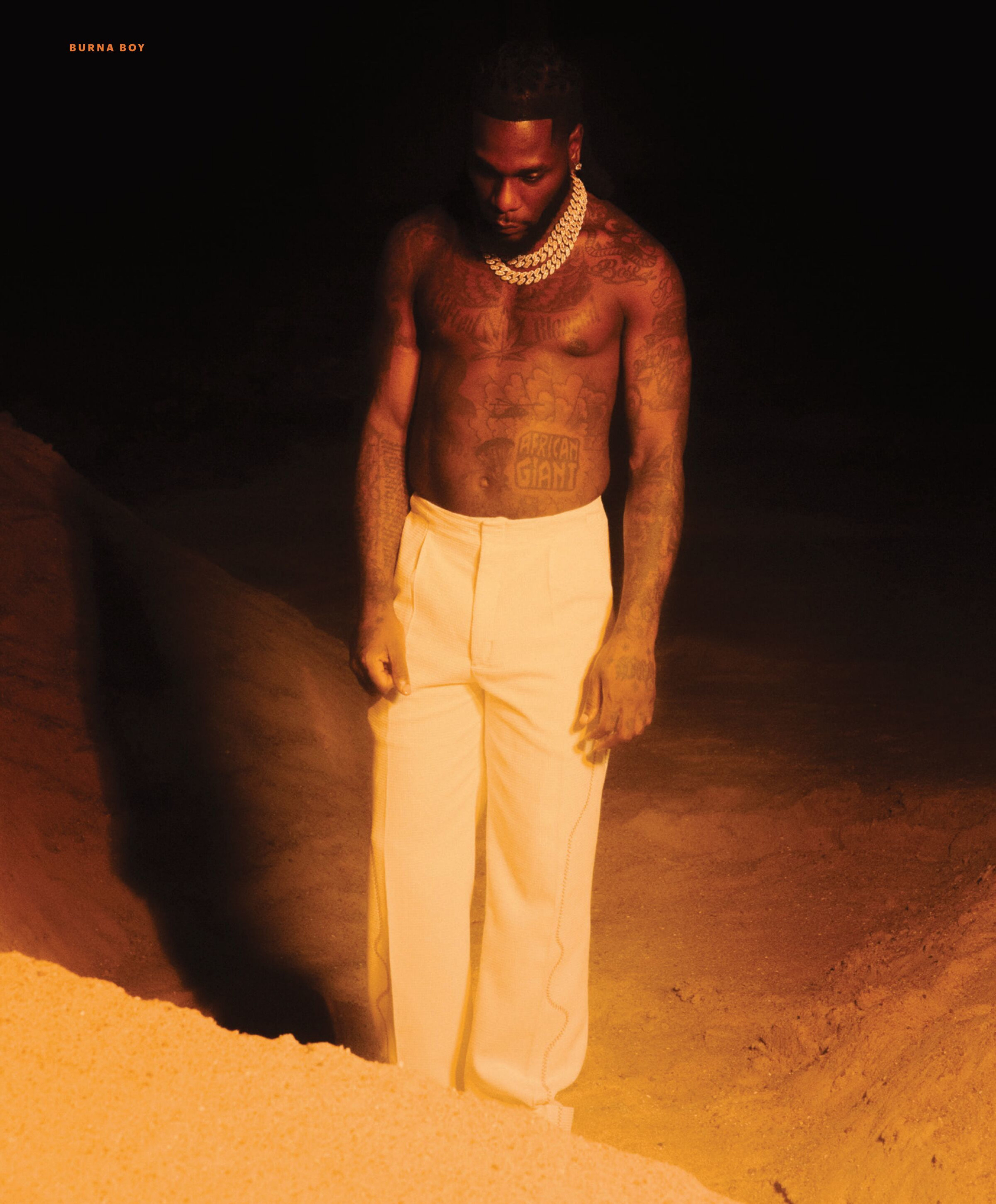
“I don’t feel comfortable with my life in people’s hands — and that means anybody, including the family”

positive interpretations of his outspoken nature would invite.

After being almost boastful of his bad-boy status in *On a Spaceship*, he sought redemption on the album of the same name just a year later. But the rehabilitation of the Burna Boy image didn’t really begin until the 2018 release of his third studio album, *Outside*. It’s full of personal revelations. The bouncy memoir, ‘Ph City Vibration’, details the life and times of the “*Port Harcourt original*”, referencing his Nigerian home city, while on the electronic album closer, ‘Outside’ featuring Mabel, he expresses his feelings of isolation. Rejecting his reputation as Nigeria’s most talented troublemaker, this was his most successful attempt at speaking exclusively through the music, a practice that has served him well in the years since.

Since tweeting “Leaving all social media platforms permanently” in May 2019, Burna Boy manages to remain outspoken about his beliefs. Returning to Instagram and Twitter from time to time, his outbursts are less frequent, but he’d sooner hang up his cape than conform to the popular expectation for artists to strive for palatability. Take it or leave it, Burna Boy is who he is. Nobody can tell him who to be or what to

BURNA BOY



do – a fact I was lucky to have grasped as a fan, before he would show up a week late to interview. His UK PR, his management, even his label (whose money he keeps so he can return it if they ever “act up”) have no dictate over Burna Boy. As he explained in the first ever issue of Nigerian music and culture publication, *The NATIVE*, in 2016, “*eni to mo’na ni*”; Burna Boy knows his way. *His way*.

On *Outside*, Burna Boy showed that he had grown into a significantly more measured and mature artist, possibly thanks to his mother, Bose Ogulu, formally assuming the role of his manager the year before.

Family members are crucial cogs in the Burna Boy machine. With his sister, Ronami,

These eclectic childhood discoveries were followed by adolescent ones, many of which were made in the UK. Arriving in England for the first time at the age of 12, it wasn’t until Burna Boy returned for university (his face tells me he was doing anything but studying during that period) that he really discovered his passion for music.

“That’s when my brain was fully formed enough to know,” he explains of his first experience of the UK music scene as a student. A period he’s previously described as his dark era, Burna Boy shies away from speaking about his personal life during that time – he did what he had to do to survive and that’s all

“The hardest thing I’ve heard in my life was Mark Morrison’s song ‘Innocent Man’. That’s the first thing that ever made me cry”

as creative director, and his other sibling, Nissi, enjoying her brother’s spoils, which he often uses to promote her music, art and other creative endeavours, Burna Boy easily meets the traditional Nigerian expectation for the eldest son to provide for his family.

“It’s very conscious,” Burna says of his choice to bring his team – literally – in-house. “Those are the only people that I’m comfortable enough with... for me it’s just the safest way. I don’t really feel too comfortable with my life in people’s hands and shit like that – and that means anybody, including the family – but at least with the family it feels a little better,” Burna finishes with a slight chuckle.

BORN IN 1991, the young Damini Ogulu developed a taste for reggae and dancehall via his father and learned about hip-hop from a young uncle. He was later introduced to R&B by a girl he liked when he was 10, who gave him a CD by American R&B singer, Joe.

But a major influence was found through his grandfather: Benson Idonije was the first manager of Afrobeat pioneer, Fela Kuti, a fact that palpably inspired the eventual Burna Boy, who is often dubbed Fela’s incarnate.

we have to know. However, when it comes to his formative music experiences, Burna Boy has fond stories to share. He recalls with a glimmer in his eyes that Mark Morrison was the first UK artist he ever revered. “I liked Mark Morrison most. Plus, he bought me a pair of Air Max’s,” on a random day outside “JD Sports or something”. Reading my age from my searching expression, Burna quickly asks, “Do you know who Mark Morrison is?”

“The name is familiar but I can’t tell you a song,” I reply, which cues a smoothly sung cover of ‘Return of the Mack’.


“No!” he exclaims. “The hardest thing I’ve heard in my life was [Mark Morrison’s song] ‘Innocent Man’. You know that’s the first thing that ever made me cry – like, actually cry.”

When he decided to pursue music as a career, Idonije was the first to nurture and encourage his grandson. As a young dreamer, there is



BURNA BOY





“Coming up through being different. Suddenly, it’s now become the way”

no greater co-sign than your grandparent’s approval. As an aspiring artist, having Fela’s former manager believe in you is validation that’s hard to beat: it’s no surprise that Burna Boy came onto the scene cocksure.

BEFORE BREAKING OUT with his debut album in 2013, Burna Boy was just entering his twenties when he released the 2012 hit single, ‘Like to Party’. A breezy summer bounce, with an LA-esque pool party video, it defied the sweaty tempos then dominating the Nigerian charts. At that time, music fans only had ears for the crowd-thumping party starters that would soon emerge on Western shores as the steady rising sound and subculture of Afrobeats.

Percussion-laden records – including Davido’s breakout ‘Dami Duro’, ‘Chop My Money’ by P-Square, which scored a feature from Akon, and, most notably, D’Banj’s ‘Oliver Twist’ – typified the appetite of the Nigerian market. These up-tempo, bellowing, mainstream Nigerian hits were slowly seeding African music into the Western zeitgeist.

Burna’s laid-back delivery over fusionist production, on the other hand, remained a niche sound. His unique brand of fusionism constituted a whole new ball game that would, gently, over time, broaden the playing field, influencing a palpably diverse Nigerian music industry.

“Now, we’re seeing a lot of other artists coming up with stuff like [that],” Burna Boy says of Nigerian music’s new dispensation towards more eclectic and diverse production. “Coming up through being different. Suddenly it’s now become the way.”

At first reluctant to “[say] anything that makes [him] feel like [he’s] taking credit again (even though God knows where the credit belongs),” Burna Boy is more than happy to remind me – and readers – that his music has always been left field.

The year 2018 was a defining one in Nigerian – and possibly even African – music. Those 12 months birthed the simultaneous global and local rise of a cohort of musicians that played away from the tastes the country was accustomed to, turning to their own worldly influences instead. Likewise, Burna Boy’s

self-defined ‘Afro-Fusion’ sound, a melange of global genres, would finally take off that year, too, in response to the release of *Outside*.

One of the music subcultures emerging from Lagos was the Alté movement. This loud-and-proud counter-grain culture grew out of a community’s unwavering conviction about doing what they wanted, ignoring the country’s customs in favour of their own self-expression. Led by defiant musical producers and avant-garde fashion tastemakers, Alté is synonymous with freedom – and Burna Boy.

“[Burna Boy] is the father of the Alté movement,” Buki HQ asserts, suggesting that the arrival of *Outside* that year demanded more accepting ears from Nigerian and African listeners, and ultimately influenced the rise of alternative music from the streets to makeshift bedroom studios.

Burna Boy is unsure about this moniker, however. “That’s what they always used to call me, but I never, like – I never accepted that shit because I didn’t understand what it meant,” Burna admits, through laughter.

Starring ‘Ye’ (his ultimate crossover single received a boost when, later that year, fans searching for Kanye West’s new self-titled project, *ye*, accidentally stumbled upon the Burna Boy track instead), *Outside* is often considered to be the start of Burna Boy’s third act. But for the Nigerian music industry, the project, along with other music from the Alté genre, evangelised the diversity of Nigerian music to the world. Suddenly, it was more than just Afropop or Afrobeats coming out of West Africa onto the world stage. Nigerian music, in its totality, was gaining ground. Critically, audiences are now craving diversity in a way the charts have never seen before.

The rush to amapiano or Kumasi drill – and Burna Boy has delivered defining hits for both genres, including 2020’s ‘Sponono’ with Kabza de Small, DJ Maphorisa and Wizkid, and Black Sherif’s ‘Second Sermon’ remix last year – indicates the insatiable appetite of the global market. The examples are plentiful: see ‘Emiliana’ singer CKay’s prolific rise on TikTok even before his success in his native Nigeria; Amaarae’s ‘Sad Girlz Luv Money’ doing the same and then inviting its Kali Uchis remix; Drake



tapping Tems on *Certified Lover Boy*'s 'Fountains'; Beyoncé producing a compilation album with West and South African artists, featuring a Burna Boy solo track. Catalysed by the uptick in diverse production that the *Outside* year set in motion, these examples illustrate how fans across the globe have found affinity with African music.

"I guess God has a sense of humour," Burna Boy begins, as he describes the reality of his crossover.

Born with near peerless musical talent, into the disadvantage of Nigerian social, economic and

"'Father of the Alté movement' — I didn't understand what it meant"

political depravation, Burna Boy has marched his way into the world and finally attained a long-sought sense of belonging. He says, "Now I belong to the world... I'm a global citizen, you know?"

Burna has stamps in major venues of the world's culture capitals: he's played London's O2, the Hollywood Bowl and Coachella, and joining the list next month will be the famed Madison Square Garden in New York, who, to Burna's surprise, "literally told him to pull up," says Buki.

There's no denying it: Burna Boy is a world-class artist who has been offered the opportunity to reach his full potential, climbing to heights the stifling Nigerian environment would convince you were impossible to reach. It has shown him that he "wasn't the only one in that predicament. There are artists that I follow that have had similar predicaments, but in different ways. You know, and they've seen me as a source of their inspiration, 'cos if you see that it could happen for me, there's [a] precedent for us all."

WHEN BURNA BOY released his fourth LP — 2019's *African Giant* — he was an artist unconvinced of his responsibility. Gradually, though, Burna is beginning to accept the influence of his position as just that: the African giant. He refuses to compromise his actions due to any sense of obligation, though. If he wavers and ends up contrived or acting out of guilt, "what makes [him] any better than the politicians?"

It might shock you to learn that despite his vocal advocacy for social justice across the world, Burna Boy is decidedly *not* political. His preoccupation is with the *truth* and illuminating the ways in which our



understanding has been warped by Western hegemony. As Nigerian – and wider African – music finds new audiences, Burna Boy remains an influential voice, not just because he releases African hits for the world to hear, but through the conversations he sparks through his work and his interviews. His specially curated episode on *The Ebro Show*, featuring music and interview subjects of his choice, was titled ‘Miseducation’ – the name given to the Ogulu family’s educational empowerment foundation for children in Port Harcourt. In the same way, Burna Boy is dedicated to re-educating his audiences as often as he can. His *African Giant* song, ‘Another Story’, begins and ends with a clip from Jide Olanrewaju’s documentary, *A History of Nigeria*.

Elsewhere, he has also platformed the narratives of Nigerian executives with integrity, such as Adebayo Ogunlesi (currently the chairman and managing partner at Global Infrastructure Partners and formerly chief client officer and executive vice chairman of Credit Suisse First Boston), whose name appears in the *Twice as Tall* single, ‘Wonderful’.

In his interviews Burna Boy continues his teachings by advocating for Black unity in tackling Western dominance and governmental subjugation, both on the continent and in the diaspora, or applauding his fellow African musicians for bringing the continent together through the music, spotlighting pan-African empowerment where our governments are seemingly reluctant to do so themselves.

When I ask what he would do if he had 24 hours to do whatever he wanted, Burna Boy states that he would change the world for Black people. In Burna Boy’s purge, he would execute a globally coordinated heist on the US and UK treasuries, using this money to fund a series of revolutions across the African continent. “You should not give me that one,” he laughs sinisterly, fully aware of the chaos his get-out-of-jail-free day would cause, but also utterly confident in its end result.

“We’re not doing political questions. None. None whatsoever,” Buki interjects, as I prepare to ask Burna Boy what spurs and motivates his political interests.

He can’t help himself, though: “Do you know who is running for president [in Nigeria]?” he asks, letting out a giant laugh before suggesting we move on.

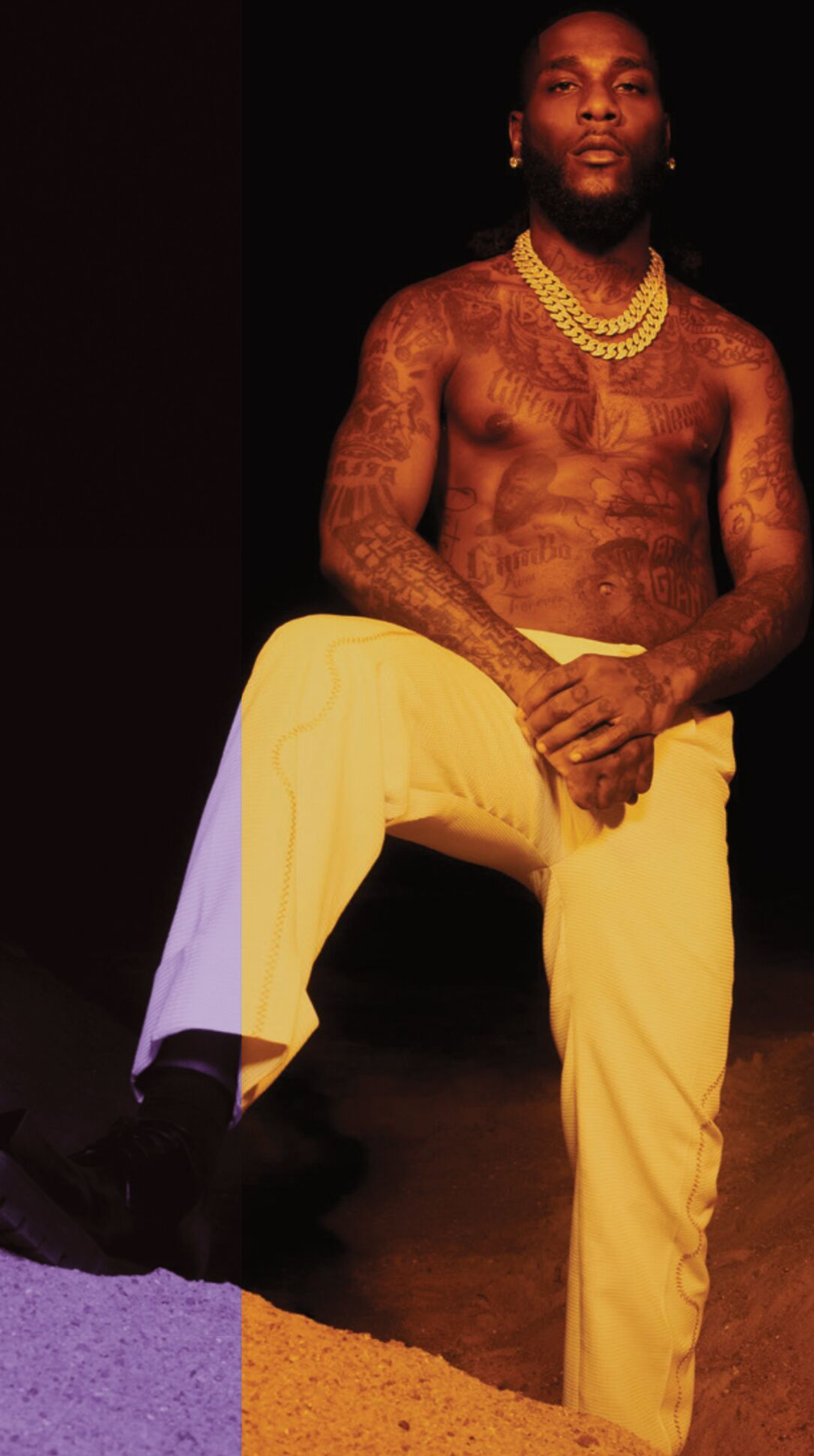
Quickly scrolling past my list of politically charged questions, I land on the next section: collaborations. “Given Nigeria’s queerphobic laws, were you ever anxious of potential backlash to your collaboration with Sam Smith, a non-binary person?” I ask.

“What’s it my business?” he responds. He cares little for the private lives of his collaborators: it’s all about the music, he reminds me. Burna Boy has been a fan of Sam Smith from as early as ‘Stay with Me’, or the



BURNA WEARS TROUSERS BY TFWHO, SHOES BY BALENCIAGA, SOCKS STYLIST'S OWN; ASSISTED BY ELLA MANGETE

“There are artists that I follow that have seen me as a source of their inspiration”



artist's Naughty Boy feature, 'La La La'; there's a debate about which came first.

Buki HQ, who sits beside Burna Boy throughout the interview, assures us it's 'La La La'. Burna is convinced it was 'Stay with Me.' I silently Google the answer and, of course, Buki is right.

"You do forget sometimes," she chides.

"When I smoke too much weed," he says.

"You know that has nothing to do with it."

Apologising each time, random side conversations between Buki and Burna punctuate our 40-minute chat. They're a joy to listen to, and reveal the playfulness the artist shares with his closest colleagues and collaborators.

Even when it seems antithetical to have our African Giant preach, in his uncompromising Blackness, of the barbaric injustices of Western civilisations upon African populations next to a white British pop star, such as Coldplay's Chris Martin, who features on 2020's 'Monsters You Made', or an American production duo, such as DJDS on their standout 2019 track 'Innocent Man', Burna Boy easily locates the sweet spot where both artists uplift each other while maintaining their individual authenticity. His collaborations with white acts – the first unexpected link-up of its kind being 2018's 'Heaven's Gate' with Lily Allen, the hugely successful final single on *Outside* – are seamless, their organic occurrence coming through in their chart-topping sound.

Although Burna's lips remain sealed as to the details of his next project, his first single of the year, 'Jagale', conveys Burna Boy's new year's resolution to be happy. "It's a personal decision that I feel I have to, you know, be [happy]," he says, as we wrap our interview. "It's not really inspired by anything, just me being tired."

After losing the first year of the new decade to Covid, and – at the same time – witnessing the brutal injustices meted out against Black people all over the world, including at home in Africa, 2021 was not the year of respite we expected it would be. Although full of highlights for Burna Boy, the lows persisted, and 2022 began with the realisation that peace and joy takes effort, as does happiness. The notion that we must put in the work every day to remain on the up is one that the world is collectively leaning further into. 'Jagale' is Burna Boy's hard-earned arrival at a good place, and his commitment to staying there. 📌



CHARLIE XCX

IT'S COMPLICATED

The avant-garde pop star's new and biggest album yet is a self-fulfilling prophecy: write a personal body of work called *Crash* about heartbreak, sex and self-destructive tendencies and live through it

**BY HANNAH EWENS
PHOTOGRAPHY JACK BRIDGLAND
CREATIVE DIRECTOR JOSEPH KOCHARIAN**

CHARLI XCX warns that her self-destruction is imminent and we're invited to witness it. "*I'm about to crash, come watch me, baby*," she sings on the opening track to her new album, *Crash*. Everything that follows feels like the detritus of a single explosion outwards: heightened emotions, sexual desire, agonising heartbreak and endings. It's a violent juxtaposition to her previous album, *how i'm feeling now*, which was insular and domestic, written during and about

the pandemic experience, when all we could do was slowly collapse in on ourselves.

Charli – whose real name is Charlotte Emma Aitchison – considers this straightforward interpretation of *Crash* and decides she likes it. It reflects her current state of mind: "I almost just feel like this album title is becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy. I *feel* very explosive right now. I feel very on the edge, sometimes in a good way, sometimes in a bad way," Aitchison continues, her voice wavering. "I feel good when I'm rehearsing for [my] tour, when I'm moving my body. I feel safe and at home there. Basically any time I'm not doing that I feel... like a time bomb, I suppose. I don't really know what I'm saying, sorry..."

You wouldn't have been able to tell she was feeling turbulent had you met her in north-east London the previous week. Charli XCX arrived at our photoshoot as every transatlantic pop star should: with an indefinable air of importance and like a blank canvas ready to be transformed (sporting a cap, bleached eyebrows over sunglasses and a puffer coat that could sleep two Arctic explorers). The self-professed workaholic was professional and polite. In latex pants and skin-tight leotards, she moved through her poses and angles for hours with precision and energy. Once the Rolling Stone UK mic was in hand, she said, with deadpan humour: "Being a pop icon is very turbulent. The highs are high and the lows are low and the iconicness has to stay at such a high level that sometimes you can really get exhausted just from being so, so iconic."

Fifty minutes after the shoot wrapped, she posted on Twitter that she was leaving the app and would likely draft tweets and allow her team to post them instead. "I've been grappling quite a lot with my mental health the past few months and obviously it makes negativity and criticism harder to handle when I come across it," she wrote, referencing her fans' adverse reaction to song-release choices, the campaign roll-out and what was necessary to fund "the greatest tour" she's ever planned.

What she had to do was agree to play at an NFT festival called Afterparty. Fans gave her a "lot of flack" for that decision but, as she later explains over a video call with the camera off, it doesn't matter any more. "I pulled out of the festival. That was my

"I ALMOST JUST FEEL LIKE THIS ALBUM TITLE IS BECOMING A SELF-FULFILLING PROPHECY. I *FEEL* VERY EXPLOSIVE RIGHT NOW. I FEEL VERY ON THE EDGE"

decision that I made and I didn't feel the need to announce it or let them know or whatever – but I did pull out."

A minority of fans have been vocally critical of the new and heavily interpolated 'Beg for You' featuring Rina Sawayama. "I've been feeling quite low throughout 2022, to be honest. I feel like my mental health has really taken a toll," Aitchison says, becoming tearful. "I've never cared if you like my music or hate my music – don't listen to it if you don't like it – but I think at a time when I was already feeling quite low, that kind of rhetoric honestly just really hurt my feelings. There is this misconception that people in the public eye are able to take any shit that you throw at them and yes, we do have to learn how to handle negativity and criticism because it comes with the territory, but at the same time, everyone's a fucking human being. I guess on that day that I messaged that I felt more human than ever."

As an extremely online artist, she understands that this is the nature of promoting yourself and your work on social





media. “The second you see something negative written about yourself, I feel like it’s survival of the fittest to focus in on that and try to protect yourself from the threat, the negative potential danger, in a really animalistic type of way.” On a macro level, someone like Charli XCX doesn’t care what the average person has to say. With a steely air, she adds: “Honestly, you can either get on my level and enjoy the fucking party or you can just not be invited because I don’t really care, do you know what I mean?” She laughs ruefully because posting her statement on Twitter led to a question about it in an interview – ours – and though she didn’t want to dwell on answering it for long, she has inadvertently drawn more attention to the scenario. “Obviously, never

the time to respond to my messages.” It’s this unique relationship Aitchison cultivated with fans – a give and take – that helped to make that album one of the artistic successes of the pandemic, but in turn made her more accessible, vulnerable and accountable to their whims and opinions.

Despite those same fans upsetting her on Twitter days later (presumably via her team but perhaps, like all of us, she quietly returns to social media after announcing self-imposed breaks), she tweets a picture of new merch: a Charli XCX anal douche, an in-joke with the fandom about the gay fan who asked her to sign his douche at a meet-and-greet. No other pop-star ally at her level of fame would have the sense of humour to entertain a gay fanbase in this way. As the internet parlance goes, Aitchison understood the assignment. She hasn’t disappointed yet; even when pop aficionados think she has, they’re usually five steps (or five years) behind her vision.

“THERE IS THIS MISCONCEPTION THAT PEOPLE IN THE PUBLIC EYE ARE ABLE TO TAKE ANY SHIT THAT YOU THROW AT THEM”

address anything publicly, that’s the vibe that I learnt from that.”

Her fans are precious to her, despite their caustic and fiery way of operating: they helped her create her intimate and diaristic piece of pandemic art, *how i’m feeling now*, by making choices about visuals, songs and roll-out. “I really respect my fandom and I’m really grateful that I have them. I don’t think they’d be good Charli XCX fans unless they were a bit opinionated, so I’m happy that they have opinions and they’ve got some sort of spice and sass to them, I suppose.”

It’s not obligatory fan service for her to highlight positive sentiment towards them in our interview. The person behind the Charli XCX fan account, Charli XCX Updates, will always remember the day they got a direct message from the star about creating her pandemic album before the knowledge was public. Since then, the pair have continued to chat. “The kind of advice she has for me has been both personal and professional,” they share. “Every time I want to know her point of view on certain things, she has taken

THE VISION HAS always been complex. In her early days, Aitchison was torn between being an experimental pop artist and an uncomplicated hitmaker: ‘I Love It’ and ‘Boom Clap’ were inescapable and her vocals on ‘Fancy’ made her distinctive voice recognisable to the average pop listener. Conversely, her first album toyed with witch house sonics and she was an early fan of London-based underground label, PC Music, who were called “the future of pop”. Its mastermind A.G. Cook became her creative director and she collaborated with their associates. The now cult classic *Vroom Vroom* EP made with SOPHIE met mixed reviews in 2015: by this point, the music was considered too experimental, edgy without a cause. Fans loved it to the degree that it’s normal for queer publications to refer to her as the “‘Vroom Vroom’ singer”.

Her self-titled album in 2019 was a statement of intent to bring avant-pop to a grander, more mainstream stage by featuring collaborations with Lizzo, Christine and the Queens and Troye Sivan. After spending the first decade of her career being as clever and subversive as she wanted, she impressed the world with 2020’s *how i’m feeling now*. Following that with her best and most accessible album yet leaves her at a significant moment in her career.

A strong narrative around Charli XCX

has been that she's too forward-thinking to win, something of an underdog. The fact that hyperpop crystallised as a genre during the pandemic is partly why the world finally caught up with her. She's considered the figurehead of this sound of the 2020s. "I think hyperpop becoming this word that people can umbrella a lot of artists under is definitely a familiarisation of a certain type of sound, which before was seen as quite uncontrollable," Aitchison explains. "You couldn't put these artists on a playlist because they didn't really sound like anything and now with that genre title, it makes certain sounds and artists easier to digest for people who maybe weren't accessing that kind of sound on their own without the guidance of a Spotify playlist. I think that makes certain things about my project a little bit easier to understand."

The messaging of that project alienated a proportion of potential listeners, too. Her lyrics are about partying until oblivion and loving and hating yourself in violent doses; medicating your stress with hedonism. It has, at times, elevated the superficial and sybaritic to an art form, which is why it's beloved by so many. She made music for people who liked to have a nihilistic laugh, who embraced working hard and playing harder during the grind of late capitalism. If you can't beat them, join them and be the best, says Charli XCX (a Leo, if astrology means anything to you). In other words, it's just not that deep.

Her persona, like her sense of humour, is at turns flat, sexy and dissociative. But her uneasy lyrics draw red circles around her own flaws: she is frequently hardest on herself. In an age of empowerment feminism, this brash self-adoration and self-loathing wasn't easily digestible. She was too dominant, multi-faceted and flippant to be your typical British female mainstream pop star or to be universally loved by the masses. At a moment in which 'dissociative feminism' is being discussed as a trend on the internet, celebrity is having a deranged avant-garde moment with artful staged paparazzi shoots, performative love and unhinged interviews, and shitposting online is the norm, it would seem that the culture is in step with Charli XCX.

Aitchison herself is against the idea that celebrities should be accessible and "real", the mode of celebrity culture

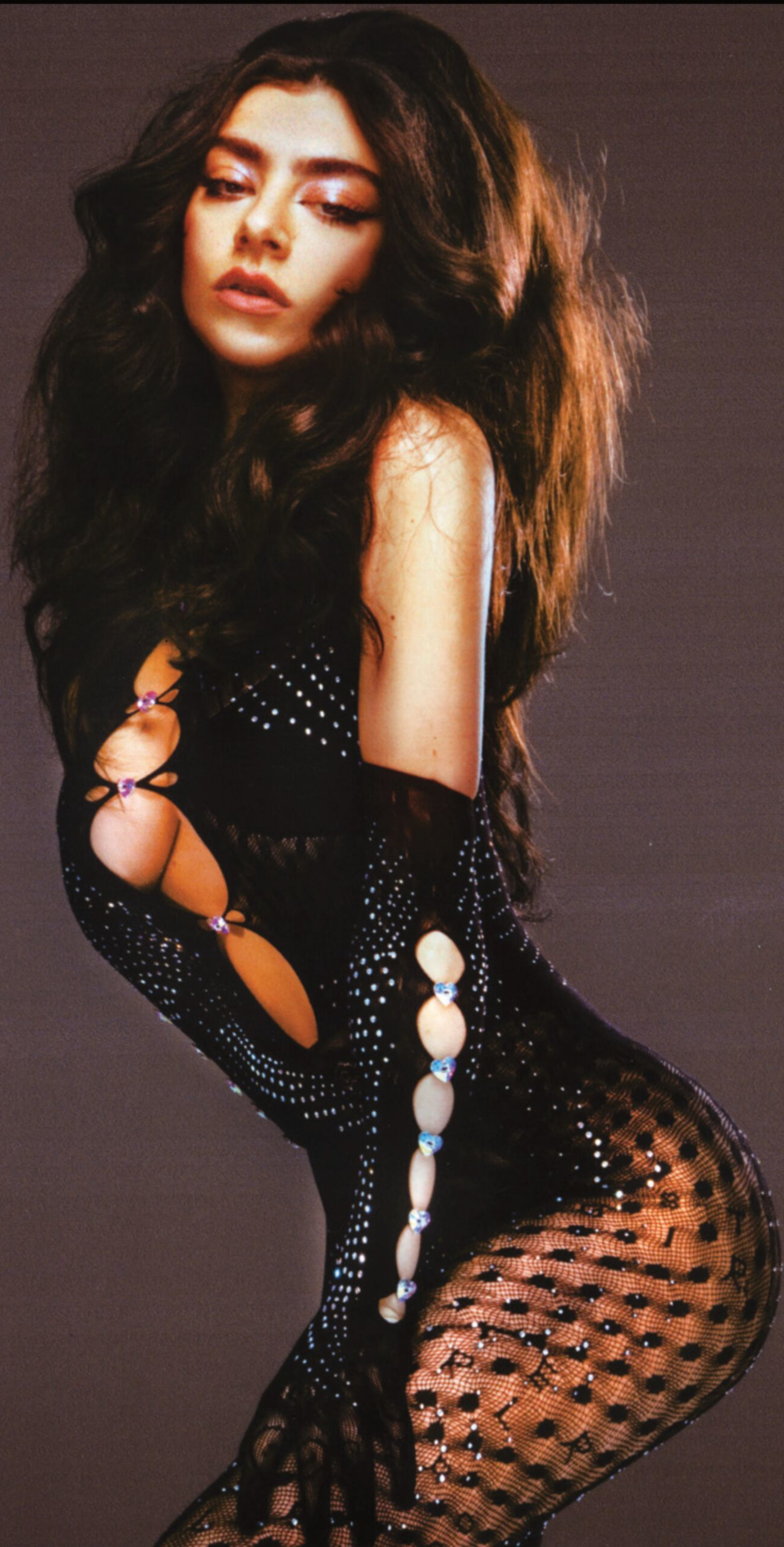
in the 2010s, crucially in full force while she was navigating the bulk of her pop career. "I enjoy that early-2000s era of celebrity where Paris Hilton and Lindsay Lohan are just being iconic and being these otherworldly figures," she says. "It's the same with musicians, to be honest. I want my favourite musicians to shock and surprise me and annoy me and completely flip my brain. I don't want to feel safe with the work that they provide me. I want to be constantly kept on my toes and not be able to see what's coming next from them." For her, that's Kanye West, Yung Lean, Tommy Cash and her collaborator Caroline Polachek. "I think that's what makes a great public figure, celebrity, artist, musician, performer, whatever: to not be able to

"I WANT MY FAVOURITE MUSICIANS TO SHOCK AND SURPRISE ME AND ANNOY ME AND COMPLETELY FLIP MY BRAIN. I WANT TO BE CONSTANTLY KEPT ON MY TOES"

predict what happens next. That's the fun of celebrity, I suppose."

FOR AITCHISON TO enjoy her new album, she had to surprise herself. The insular, fast-paced construction of *how i'm feeling now* informed its follow-up: "I knew I had to turn it up to high-octane, ten, pop-star level for it to feel fresh for myself." *Crash* should have existed first: 'New Shapes', 'Good Ones', 'Every Rule' and 'Twice' were written, at least in part, before the previous album began but the pandemic halted it. She planned to put her own money into this big, impressive pop album and not being able to travel to collaborate with pop producers or put on her biggest tour yet made the entire venture redundant.

By September or October 2020, a few months after *how i'm feeling now* was finished and released, *Crash* became her focus. "This album was originally going to be called *Sorry If I Hurt You* and I liked that title because that sentence is both past, present and future," she says. "You can say





that sentence to someone as if you hurt them in the past or as if you're going to hurt them or if you're about to do it right there and then."

Of all tenses, the album is most indebted to the past. While making it, she was listening to *Control* by Janet Jackson and songs by Cameo (though generally she doesn't consume music while in creation mode because it is a distraction). Inspiration for her retro bombshell look came from watching live performance videos of Madonna, 80s interior design and movies like *Faster, Pussycat! Kill! Kill!*. You can see the research in the campiness of her humping her own gravestone in the video for 'Good Ones' or the bouffant hair with deadness between the eyes on the single

"THIS BEAUTIFUL LOVE STORY ON THIS ALBUM IS ALSO QUITE TRAUMATIC TO LISTEN BACK TO, BECAUSE THIS IS A RELATIONSHIP THAT NO LONGER EXISTS"

covers: the visuals are equally indebted to exploitation films, Elvira and Pat Benatar.

Lyrically and sonically, *Crash* conjures up the monumental drama of 80s music: sweeping landscapes, thunderous skies, bold colours and the expanse of a dancefloor half-empty and ready to be met with your misery. This mood is obviously felt in the interpolation tracks, like 'Beg for You', which uses September's 2006 hit 'Cry for You', a song which in turn mimicked 80s classic, 'Smalltown Boy' by Bronski Beat.

"It's become a trend within pop music these days to be very referential of previous hits, which is cool if you're into nostalgia, less cool if you're into pure futurism. I feel like there's a cool middle ground that can be met, which is hopefully what I'm doing," Aitchison says. It's also there in the way the 80s references are heightened by her own overwhelming and staggering emotions. Far from adopting the classic tactic of front-loading an album with hits, *Crash* builds to feature the best run of Charli songs yet, climaxing with stories about lust, love and heartbreak.

Her next single 'Baby' is "a sex anthem, basically". The deceptively smart 'Baby' knows that with pleasure comes pain: it starts as a promise of lasting carnal satisfaction over a funky, sexy, synth track and, with gleeful delight, turns into a vow to break your heart and shred it into tiny pieces ("I'mma fuck you up / I'mma fuck you up / I'mma fuck you up / I'mma fuck you up – wooo!"). "I was feeling myself that day in the studio and that song just makes me feel so sexy and confident and was an important song for the foundation of this album," she recalls. "I made it with Justin Raisen, a big contributor to my first album *True Romance*, so that was a cyclical thing of going back to work with him."

The following track 'Lightning' is a standout dancefloor filler that harnesses the euphoric misery of Robyn's best known hits. "*Heartbreak already hit me once, they say that it won't happen twice*," she prays, shortly before being struck down. For this track, she returned to another *True Romance* collaborator, Ariel Rechtshaid. 'Lightning' is followed by 'Every Rule', an oral history of a relationship over an instrumental that could've come straight from *Twin Peaks*. It's a song about her long-term relationship that recently ended, made with A.G. Cook and Oneohtrix Point Never "a long time" prior to *how i'm feeling now*.

"It's funny when you talk about explosions, this really genuine and beautiful love story on this album is also quite traumatic to listen back to, because this is a relationship from my past that no longer exists," she confides. "Even the story within how we met is quite explosive, I suppose. I really love this song because I'm just saying exactly what happened and it feels very truthful."

Other songs deal in relatable ideas like men giving you the ick – doing something that suddenly and irreversibly turns you off – and not knowing whether you've blown up a long-term relationship for the right reasons or you've self-sabotaged again.

Initially, messaging around the album indicated that it was about the destruction of the pop star in a manipulative and damning major label system. Charli XCX was using the spoils of her fifth and final record in her major label deal she signed with Atlantic to make a statement about autonomy and artistic freedom. With its album cover of the singer, bloodied and on the windscreen of a car in a bikini, *Crash* is an obvious reference

to the J.G. Ballard novel of the same name. In the book, former car-crash victims seek sexual thrills from recreating the experience of crashes. In the *Guardian*, Zadie Smith wrote of the British postmodernist classic, “*Crash* is an existential book about how everybody uses everything. How everything uses everybody.”

“I’d never actually made a major label album in the way that it’s actually done,” Aitchison explains of *Crash*. “It felt interesting to me to use moments of that process to make this final album as somebody who has really navigated the major label record system since I was 16 completely on my own terms.” It’s been a challenge for her. Between pitching to streaming platforms, making sure visuals align, waiting for answers to her questions and for drop dates, she has found it painfully slow: “I’m learning about patience and taking things a little bit slower, which is probably why I have so much time to look at the internet now. There’s a lot more promo and talking about yourself, which one would think I’d be good at by now but I actually hate it.”

Her old cover interviews on previous album campaigns involved meeting a journalist on a night out or going to a spa to drink champagne with them. We are on a 30-minute call. Does she not like press any more or does she perhaps worry too much about being misinterpreted? After a pause, she says, “I really enjoy press when I’m in a good mood or a good headspace. But honestly I feel like, for me, press is kind of a volatile space. I’ve been feeling really self-destructive lately. So it’s hard for me to not sit on this call with you and destroy everything I’ve built because I’m feeling really reckless. It’s actually really a challenge in self-control, press, at the moment.”

It’s impossible to say how much of this is the *Crash* narrative and art project and how much is Aitchison’s reality, which she is sharing honestly. Ultimately, it doesn’t matter – a fully formed, larger-than-life pop narrative that keeps people guessing is what Aitchison wants from her favourite artist and she’s giving it to us at the height of her powers.

In her 2014 *Complex* cover story, she told the journalist that her end game was people writing about her, to say “just... that I was an important songwriter who changed the landscape of pop music”. Eight years on and she has indisputably done this.

To the mind of her collaborator Rina Sawayama, Charli XCX is currently our greatest pop innovator. On a personal level, Charli is “lovely but fearless – that definitely contributes to why she can do what she does and [why] people are drawn to her as a person and artist,” says Sawayama. Charli’s trajectory and testing relationship with the industry has given Sawayama ideas about how she wants to navigate her own career. “I think for new artists you should definitely model on Charli’s attitude of not feeling like you have to go down a one-track route. You can do weird, you can do pop, you can do whatever you want.”

At the close of our call, Aitchison is concerned that she’s been too negative or that I’ve read her as such and wants it on

“IT’S HARD FOR ME TO NOT SIT ON THIS CALL WITH YOU AND DESTROY EVERYTHING I’VE BUILT BECAUSE I’M FEELING REALLY RECKLESS”

record that she is animated by *Crash* and what she anticipates it will do for her year. “Despite my stubbornness and quite cunty attitude, I am a really positive person and I’m really, really so fucking hyped to get on the tour and the stage and bring this shit to life,” she says. This year, Alexandra Palace will host her biggest London show to date by far. “I used to play shows at Hoxton Bar and Grill with only my mum and dad there, so to think there’ll be thousands and thousands of people watching me sing my songs is crazy and I’m really excited about it.”

Now Charli XCX is back in the driver’s seat and indignant and there’s no time to breathe because she seems to have remembered in a flash what she does and more importantly who she is: “–and I really deserve it because I’ve fucking grinded and I work really hard and I always stay true to myself and I feel really passionate about what I’ve done and the things I’ve achieved so I can’t wait to get on a stage and absolutely kill it, basically.” After a significant sigh, there’s a smile in her voice: it might be complicated, but it’s Charli, baby. @





top MAN

As the new season of *Top Boy* begins, Rolling Stone UK meets lead actor and rapper Ashley Walters to talk So Solid Crew, turning 40, and the responsibility that comes with being in a position of power in the British TV industry

By **Jason Okundaye**
Photography **Shenell Kennedy**
Creative direction **Joseph Kocharian**
Styling **Bo Dube**

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artists to flourish on screen is because *Top Boy* is the kind of social realist drama speaking to Black life that wasn't available for him when he was younger.

"We didn't have a genre back then that represented Black people in the way that they're represented now," he says, "so most of the parts you [would] play didn't really ring true, or relate to a Black audience. There weren't things like *Top Boy* back then. There weren't things that were authentic. Stories that are written by ourselves and for ourselves, that didn't exist."

Now *Top Boy* is celebrated for its fusion of UK rap talent with drama. Its 2019 soundtrack, *A Selection of Music Inspired by the Series*, saw the contributions of British artists including AJ Tracey, Fredo, Ghetts, and Nafe Smallz.

But according to Walters, the series was not imagined as a medium through which UK rap could flourish: "It wasn't on purpose; we didn't set out to make this a show to bring musicians into and they flourish as actors or whatever." This has just been a brilliant byproduct of its success.

WALTERS, WHO turns 40 in June this year, is nearly three decades deep into the entertainment industry, and his professional trajectory has seen him transition from being marked for his precociousness (joining at 17, he was the youngest member of So Solid Crew), to becoming a senior industry figure. There's a confidence and charm he has that only comes with age and maturity; and the ability to let go and unclench.

On set for his photoshoot, he's playful and full of banter. He comes out of the dressing room breaking into sprints and boxing swings as he hypes himself up for the day. He's asked to pose with a pair of sugarbush Protea flowers and swings them around like nunchucks. He's singing along to Notorious B.I.G.'s 'Juicy' and Wu-Tang Clan's 'Gravel Pit', but he also asks where the newer tunes are at. I ask if he was offended by the throwbacks. "I weren't offended!" he protests, chuckling, "do you know what it is, it's a slight insecurity 'cos it's like, I know

I'm getting older, and sometimes you're like, 'Did someone put this on for me?', and every room I go into I'm the eldest these days, and that's a shift for me."

Among five top-20 hits, it was the platinum-selling No. 1 '21 Seconds' which saw So Solid Crew's popularity explode. How did he cope with exposure to fame and success at such a young age? "In hindsight, I'd say it was really difficult to cope with, but at the time it was something I didn't think about," he says. "When it came to the success we had, as much as it was slightly overnight, and something we weren't expecting, I had 30 big brothers to protect me from a lot of the stuff that was really going on."

Even so, the group undeniably occupied a contentious space in British culture which came with its own pressures. "It came at a time when what was happening domestically in our city [London] was quite prominent in the media – and that was gun crime, knife crime, and that was the focal point... and I guess we became scapegoats for what was wrong with inner-city youths."

This was certainly the line parroted at the top tiers of government. In 2003, Labour Culture Minister Kim Howells singled out So Solid Crew and the "hateful lyrics of those boasting, macho idiot rappers", drawing a direct line between their music and gun and drug crimes which had

swept the capital. Howells's comments were condemned for racism and criminalising Black music culture, with responses emphasising that So Solid Crew's sounds reflected the concerns and troubles afflicting inner-city Black youth. That, for Walters, is So Solid Crew's enduring legacy.

"That sort of group, So Solid, had never been seen before in that form," he explains. "A group of people that spoke truthfully about

what they were experiencing, where they came from, and the impact that was having on their community. It made a lot of people stand up. But also made a lot of people fearful of the truth. And I guess we took the brunt of that. We kind of died on the cross."

At the time of the minister's comments, Walters himself had only months before been released from an 18-month stint in a young offenders institution for possession of a gun. He affirms that it wasn't plain recklessness or acting macho that led to his incarceration, but something which felt almost inevitable due to the environment he was forced to navigate.

“So Solid had never been seen before. People that spoke truthfully about what they were experiencing”

being an actor is not something Ashley Walters has always been upfront about. Although he attended Sylvia Young Theatre School and made his TV debut portraying Andy Phillips in *Grange Hill* in 1997, many of his peers had no idea he acted at all.

Under the alias Asher D, Walters had risen to prominence as a rapper in the hip hop and UK garage collective So Solid Crew. Then, one afternoon, So Solid Crew were preparing to perform for Radio 1 Live Lounge at Abbey Road Studios. "We all sat in a green room and were eating lunch and there was a TV in there," Walters begins. "Someone turned the TV on, and everyone was minding their business, talking, until I popped up on the screen. It was a character I played called Omar in *The Young Indiana Jones Chronicles*, which used to be on Sky One back in the day. It was me. Riding on this camel. And everyone's kind of like: 'Oh, shit, Ash, is that you?' and that's how everyone was introduced to the fact I was an actor as well."

The rapper-actor formula is something that is now revered, but Walters claims this was not always the case. "Believe it or not, it was slightly frowned upon back then to be an actor. I didn't get a lot of positive responses from my peers. If you wanted to be an actor, it was like, 'Why would you do that? Just be a musician.'"

When I meet Walters in an east London studio, we reflect on being weeks away from the premiere of the second season of the rebooted *Top Boy* franchise. The crime drama series has nurtured the acting talents of UK rappers including Dave, Scorchie, Little Simz, NoLay and Kano. Walters believes that the ability for these



“It’s stupid to say, but I didn’t really expect myself to get into that situation. I thought I was far away from being in that position, but it didn’t take long for me to find myself in that position. It was a wake-up call for me.” His imprisonment steered him in a new direction – rather than acting being a secret shame, a relic of his childhood, it became something he began to pursue with more intent.

“After I was released from prison, the first thing I wanted to do was change my life around, be a different person. The person I was meant to be. And that was hard because it meant turning my back on a lot of people that I had come up with, changing my circle and whatever. It was difficult. And pretty much since I’ve been flying solo.” And in taking this path, he was rewarded with success – taking on iconic roles like Antoine in 50 Cent’s *Get Rich or Die Tryin’* in 2005.

Unlike the comradeship Walters found in So Solid Crew, he describes his early acting career as being defined by ruthless competition and a lack of communication between Black male actors. “What it forced on you was a feeling of isolation, and there was a lack of unity. And that’s not because we didn’t want to be unified as people, it was because you knew that there would only be one Black person allowed in this show. You didn’t want your position to be taken from you, so you’re very closed off.”

He claims that as a younger man in the industry, he found it difficult to connect with older Black actors because of this, though he notes that the actor Lennie James was instrumental in developing his career.

The picture is totally different today and he points to the close links actors like Daniel Kaluuya, Damson Idris and Idris Elba, among others, have with each other.

For Walters, *Top Boy* is a production space where these intergenerational contacts between Black British actors can flourish.

“I talk to Micheal Ward a lot”, he says. “We have a really good relationship and he asks a lot of questions: that’s why he’s so good. A smart person always asks.”

THE SERIES FINALE of season one of *Top Boy* had seen Walters’ character, Dushane Hill, approach Ward’s character, Jamie Tovell, with the offer of freedom from prison in exchange for loyalty and service. Leading up to this, Dushane had returned from Jamaica to run the estate of Summerhouse’s activities, setting him up as rivals against the ruthless London Fields gang run by Jamie. Having offered Jamie a lifeline he’s disarmed him, and thus Dushane is back as east London’s Top Boy.

Despite this, when we meet Dushane again



ASHLEY WEARS SUIT, GUCCI ARCHIVE FROM CONTEMPORARY WARDROBE, SHOES BY BIRKENSTOCK

in season two, he's a gentrifier, building a property empire against the wishes of his mother and finding ways to benefit from the social cleansing of the Summerhouse estate.

"You look disgusted!" Walters laughs, as I ask him about these details. It will be a difficult direction for fans to swallow, Walters acknowledges, saying of season two that: "What you're just starting to see is actually Dushane is a cold-hearted person who will do anything to get things his way."

He says that depicting Dushane in this new series has been personally challenging. "I wouldn't make the same decisions as him, so you're always fighting against that. And there is a point where you have to let go and understand that you're not him."

Unlike his character, Walters, who grew up on the North Peckham estate, is an opponent of gentrification, having seen loved ones moved out of the Aylesbury estate in Walworth: "It's something I've had to watch in real life with a lot of family and friends that I grew up with, and they end up being shipped out to north England, Birmingham, this place, that place, places they're not familiar with."

More empathetically, we can understand Dushane as someone who is attempting to transition out of the unstable, criminal life through more legitimate means – despite how difficult it is to let go of his lifestyle.

"I've got a complete understanding of how trapping that life can be," Walters says, reflecting on his own past. "If you get into it, and it's as lucrative for you as it has been for Dushane, I can understand how difficult it would be to walk away from it, just because of the trappings and the money and success it brings. More importantly, the people that you've taken on your journey that have also become accustomed to that lifestyle or whatever, are always going to try and bring you back in and involve you in some sort of way."

Reflecting on his own life and his transition from his youth, he says, "I guess I made it, in the sense that I managed to turn it around. But not everyone does. I guess *Top Boy* is the story of people that don't."

A key difference in filming this season, for Walters, has been that over the past few years he's been working on production and taken a seat in the directors' chair. This experience as both director and actor on *Top Boy* has given him a deeper appreciation for "the pieces of the puzzle, how it's put together and how you as an

“After I was released from prison, the first thing I wanted to do was change my life around, be a different person”

actor can be influential in that sense”.

Walters' training began with his directorial debut *Boys for Sky Arts*, but this project had first been triggered by him being told to gain experience after he asked to direct episodes of *Bulletproof*, the action drama he had co-created and co-starred in alongside Noel Clarke.

After a *Guardian* investigation exposed historic and recent sexual assault allegations against Clarke by at least 20 women, Sky cancelled *Bulletproof*, which at the time had begun production for its fourth series. Walters tells me that he first learned of Clarke's actions when the nation did. He was at home when he found out the news and the revelations took him by surprise.

"I was upset. It came at a time when we were all just about to start writing and shooting another season [of *Bulletproof*] that we had just prepared for. But first and foremost it was just shock. It was sadness

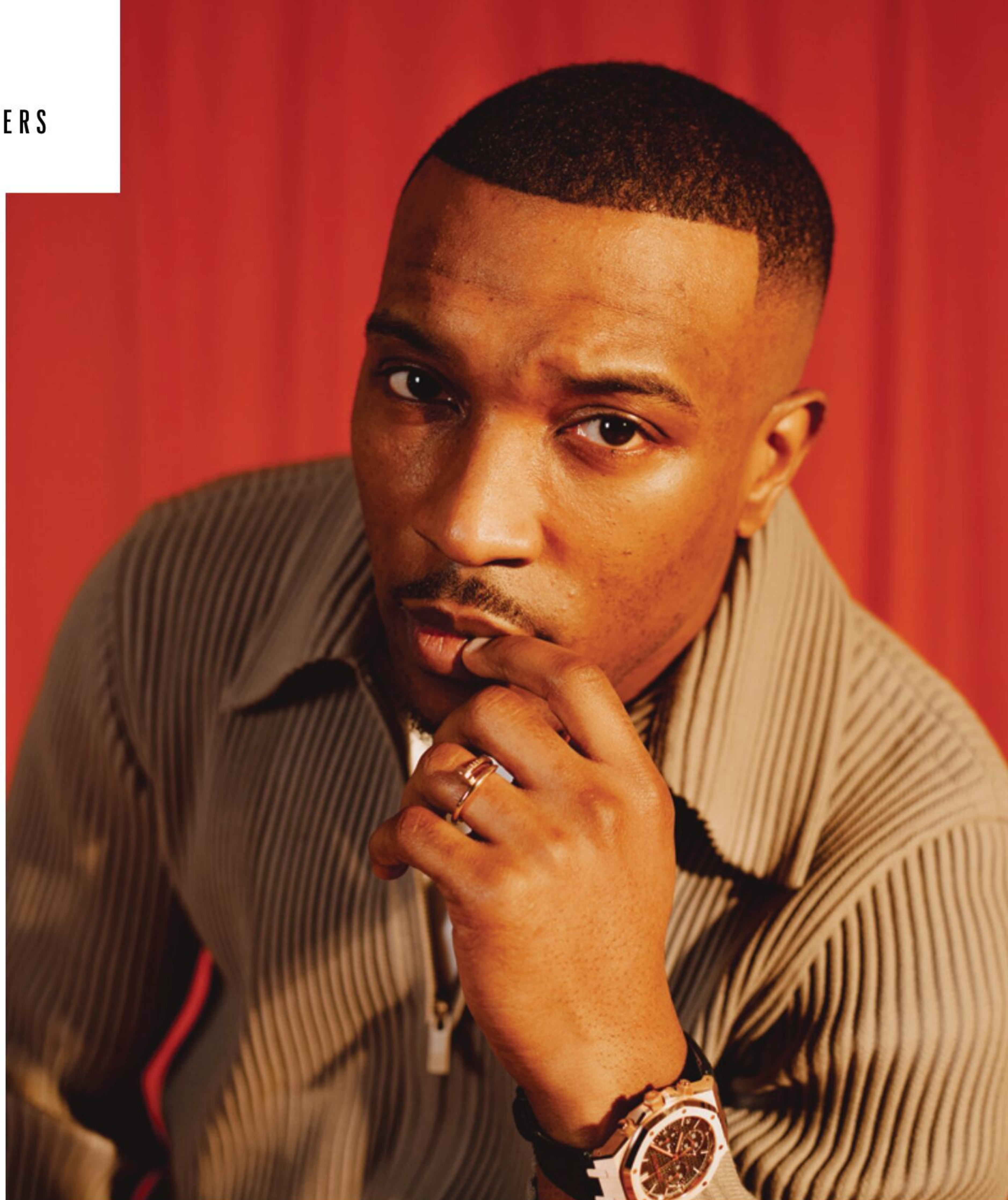
that this sort of stuff had allegedly been happening as close to me as it did."

A number of the allegations were connected to *Bulletproof*, which Walters says was "hard for me to understand. I'm not trying to put myself in the mix, but I was deeply hurt by what I heard and how things went."

Much like how Walters describes his early experiences in the entertainment industry, he and Clarke had not started out as friends. Their relationship was rocky, "like I was saying before, there wasn't much unity, we had our own perceptions and reservations about being friends in the beginning".

When the opportunity arose to work with Clarke on *Bulletproof*, Walters had relished it: "It was good to be able to develop a show with him and learn from him as well, because he's been producing, writing, and directing long before I even thought about doing it" – attesting to the seniority and importance of the now disgraced Clarke as an industry figure to generations of Black talent.

Walters reaffirms his support for the





“I guess I made it, in the sense that I managed to turn it around. Top Boy is the story of people that don’t”

ASHLEY WEARS JACKET BY DUNHILL, RING BY CARTIER

ASHLEY WEARS JACKET BY ISSEY MIYAKE PLEATS PLEASE AT MATCHESFASHION, T-SHIRT
BY MARTINE ROSE, TROUSERS BY STUDIO NICHOLSON AT MATCHESFASHION, SOCKS BY
SOCKSHOP, SHOES BY BIRKENSTOCK, RING BY CARTIER, WATCH BY AUDEMARS PIGUET





ASHLEY WEARS JACKET BY MARTINE ROSE, SHIRT BY TED BAKER, TIE BY DIOR, TROUSERS BY STUDIO NICHOLSON, RINGS AND BRACELET BY CARTIER

women who spoke up against Clarke. “I think it was a powerful thing that they did and I think it’s going to help convince other women to do the same thing if they need to,” he says.

Although he acknowledges that livelihoods were affected by Sky’s cancellation of *Bulletproof*, he views this as a necessary action (“I think it needed to happen”). Walters doesn’t shy away from admitting that Clarke had been his friend, and I ask him if he has been in touch with him since the allegations broke. “Since this whole thing happened we haven’t been talking,” he says. “We’ve had a few text messages and whatever, but we definitely don’t talk to each other.”

As Walters continues to take on a more senior role in the entertainment industry, he’s thinking about how he can ensure the sets that he works on and the projects he manages are safe environments for those working on them. He’s already had opportunities to put these lessons into practice. Off the back of his directorial debut, *Boys*, he was offered the chance to direct episodes for the upcoming fifth season of *Ackley Bridge*. “I’m still in post-production now. It was an amazing experience, but challenging. It’s a challenging thing to direct fast-paced TV.”

He’s also taken to writing shows, one of which is in development with Channel 4, and the other in Sky Studios. He doesn’t give away too many details – but the Channel 4 show he says has been years in the making is called *Pirates*, “a story seen through the eyes of a 15-year-old kid in 1994, watching the transition from jungle, drum and bass, into garage, through pirate radio”.

IT’S NOT JUST in his professional life that Walters has been making changes and upgrades. He’s serious about his health: he quit smoking and drinking a year and a half ago; and as his strong build can attest, he works out rigorously. He also stays close to his doctors. “I’m a slight hypochondriac when it comes to my health, my doctors probably get pissed off with me,” he says.

Dietwise, he’s kicking his Deliveroo habit and pays more attention to calories, carbs, and protein – though he admits it’s his biggest struggle. “I don’t sit there happy eating salad all the time; sometimes I want to eat ribs with all the sauces!”

He adds, “I’m just trying to take those incremental steps to make my life last longer, man.”

“I’m just trying to take those incremental steps to make my life last longer. You don’t know when your time is”

We then reflect on the fact that Black men, as they age, have to walk with a strong sense of their own mortality – and conversation turns to the recent sudden death of Jamal Edwards, who Walters counted as a friend.

“If there’s one thing we’re learning from recent events, especially with Jamal, who I knew very well, it’s you don’t know when your time is. Your health could be really bad and you don’t even know about it.”

His new home makes it easier to enjoy a healthy lifestyle. In February 2021, a year to the month that we speak, Walters left his home in north London’s Crouch End for the pastoral comforts of Herne Bay, a seaside town on the north coast of Kent. It was the realisation of a lifelong fantasy.

“It’s always been one of my dreams since I was a teen to eventually, when I can afford it, and when the time felt right, to bring up our family outside London.”

Unsurprisingly, Walters’ move, like many others, was largely triggered by London’s extortionate housing market – he has a large family, with eight children. Naturally, he wanted a house with lots of space, so it was “more economical” for him to move away. But a more personal reason driving his desire for a fresh start elsewhere is the

intensity of the difficulties he faced in his early life in London. “I didn’t really want my kids to go through the same things I did,” he explains.

So, how is life in Herne Bay? “I don’t know if you’ve ever watched *Emmerdale*...” he begins. He scans my face, waiting for a reaction and finds none, “...yeah, probably not. But it’s like a village. A really tiny place with a really small number of people that all know each other and are quite traditional; you know, farmers, it has that vibe to it.”

He misses London when it takes him three hours to get to work, but nothing beats the coastline with its fresh air and fun. He enjoys family trips to Broadstairs Beach and Margate and he regularly walks his French bulldog, Max, along the Herne Bay coast. The location complements his love of seafood, too: he’s a regular at Margate’s Buoy and Oyster, and loves the Whitstable area for its large oyster farms.

“It’s a much slower way of life and it’s forced me to be slightly more interactive with my neighbours,” he explains, “I think London, as overpopulated as it seems sometimes, I don’t think people really connect with people that they don’t know, people outside of their network. So I spent how many years living in London and never got to know my neighbours.”

“In the year that I’ve been living in Herne Bay, I’ve built really good relationships with the people around me.” @



AT BREAKING POINT

Mental health problems and addiction have afflicted some of music's best-known names — in some cases resulting in death. This is the unpalatable truth as revealed in *Bodies: Life and Death in Music*, written by rock music journalist Ian Winwood. In this exclusive extract, he reveals his private battle with alcohol and drugs

After the death of his father, Winwood found himself mired in a spiral of substance abuse on a life-threatening scale. Benders fuelled by a cocktail of whiskey, cocaine and prescription drugs could last days at a time, only to end with spells in and out of hospital. Here, he describes reaching rock bottom in 2015. ►



I no longer require space in which to create chaos. An hour before being picked up by my singer-songwriter friend Frank Turner, at the start of a day in early summer, I sink three-quarters of a bottle of whiskey. It would have been more, but that's all I had. Pushed for time, I drink some of it in the shower. At first convinced that I can hold things together, in the car it transpires that I can barely speak.

With London ceding ground to a green and pleasant landscape, Frank and I are on our way to the Latitude Festival in Suffolk, at which I'm due to interview him onstage in front of more than a thousand people.

From Glasgow to Yeovil, over the past few years I've been part of maybe a dozen such happenings. In clubs and theatres, Frank draws the applause while I keep things moving. Sometimes I get a laugh or two. At the end of the set he plays a few songs. We have good chemistry, he and I; financially viable, on our second such tour, in 2019, we found ourselves stationed at the kind of hotels that serve eggs royale for breakfast. A writer rarely gets the chance to see an audience: even though it isn't mine, I'm grateful for having been invited to be part of such a rewarding experience.

But for our booking in Suffolk, even the prospect of being paid to talk isn't enough to stop me. Merely functionally drunk by the time we undertake our mid-afternoon set, in the Big Top tent at Latitude, I can barely hold a thought in my head.

On the long ride home, once again I remind my friend that I'm sorry.

"Honestly, don't worry about it," he tells me. "You more or less held it together. Anyway, who am I to talk? I played a gig in Manchester where I was so trashed that the only thing I was able to say was, 'My name is Frank Turner'. I say 'say' — I slurred it over and over again. I dropped my plectrum and it took me, like, five minutes to pick it up."

From this, Frank learned a lesson I seem determined to ignore.

After reports of my erratic behaviour during an interview make it back to base camp, the editor of *Kerrang!* invites me in for a chat.

"Is everything all right?"

"Sorry, I had a bit of a rough spell. I'm out of it now."

"Okay. All right. But, listen, you can always talk to us, you know."

Instead, not long afterwards I answer the door to a furious features editor demanding to know the whereabouts of a missing cover story. Despite my insistence that it would be in his inbox five hours ago, by now the article is three days late. "Mate, I swear, it'll be with you in the morning," I tell him. Tragically, I actually believe

this to be true. A portrait of fury and concern, my visitor is sweeping up the broken glass scattered across the kitchen floor. I'm naked from the waist down. My feet are cut. I can't say for sure, but it appears that the problem is not simply a matter of poor time management. After being given more than a dozen chances to redeem myself, my editors finally grow tired of cleaning up my mess. For the second time, I allow a dream job to disappear through the many cracks in my world.

Along with party packs of bourbon and cocaine, by now I'm taking a vast concoction of very cheap and virulently nasty legal highs sold from a basement shop on the Chalk Farm Road. Wrapped in brightly coloured sachets, each packet carries the warning that this is 'plant food not meant for human consumption'. I'm swallowing a variety of pills purchased from Dr Internet. Dispatched from India, the tablets are manufactured by a company that requests payment by money transfer from Western Union. GlaxoSmithKline they are not. Warning of the dangers of buying prescription medication online, I well recall seeing an advert at the pictures in which a young man extracts a dead rat from his own mouth. What you order might

not be what you get was the gist. But even this grisly public service broadcast isn't enough to stop me.

With my head wreaking havoc with my circuitry, I think it's fair to say that my life is in danger. One spring afternoon I wake from a vivid dream in which I've been to hospital. Placed on a stretcher by a team of paramedics, beneath sunny skies I'm carried into the back of an ambulance. Needle in hand, a doctor at University College Hospital is required to cut a vertical line up the sleeve of my three-quarter-length navy blue Ben Sherman jacket. Oh, doc, I love this coat. On a gurney in a corridor, I close my eyes with something close to serenity. Coming to at home — well, that was weird — like a doomed character in a horror movie I discover the garment from my 'dream' has indeed been cut to the shoulder. I have no idea for how long I was in the care of the National Health Service. I couldn't tell you what procedures have been undertaken in my name. I don't recall how I got home. These scrapes of mine are fast becoming unmanageable.

By now I've attracted the attentions of a team of care workers, counsellors, therapists and psychoanalysts. On calm days I walk up to a





STAGE FRIGHT
Frank Turner
and Winwood
– plus booze

mental health facility in Belsize Park; waiting to be called, I take my place in a waiting room populated by people for whom being terribly unwell is a full-time job. Me, I can cram a month's worth of damage into two or three days. If required, I can blow the doors off in a single afternoon.

"Ian, what do you think is triggering this behaviour?" I'm asked. "With all due respect," I say, "the verb is only relevant in the sense that this fucking thing is like a bullet." I appreciate the talk about trying to slow things down, about learning to spot the signs, but please believe me when I tell you that by now this thing is flying through the air at a velocity that cannot be seen by my naked eye. I think it wants to kill me.

It seems like I'm always in hospital. Driven to the edge of panic by a fellow patient screaming for hours on end, one night I flee from a ward at the Royal Free in Hampstead. Trying his best to stop me, a security guard tells me that the police will pick me up before I reach my front door. Fuck that, I'll take my chances. Still in my National Health Service pyjamas, clothes clutched to my chest, I board the last Overground train to Camden Road. I'm surprisingly light on my feet, all things considered. Until this morning I'd been under round-the-clock surveillance for three days in case I was killed by the toxins in my system. I couldn't walk without the assistance of

a carer. After knocking back three dozen bottles of spirits and many bindles of cocaine over the course of a nine-day bender, the bill for my actions was steeper than ever.

Gruelling and apparently without end, the requirements of drying out for 72 hours constitute the lowest moments of my life. As if surfing the channels of an upended world, unable to piece together linear thought, my mind leaps erratically across a topography of unconnected moments.

Scrunched under a thin blanket that somehow fails to cover even my own limited form, under these conditions I'm easy prey to the worst kind of desolation I've ever known. Panic is only ever a breath away. From a hospital bed at four o'clock in the morning, my situation seems hopeless. I just can't see a way out of this.

And then I go home. The police never came. Amid the glow of an equally disproportionate belief that everything has returned to normal, over the course of a few days I walk half a mile to the crisis team at St Pancras Hospital. Abutting the coroner's complex at which I visited my father, the people treated here are on the cusp of presenting a

clear and present danger to themselves and to others. One step further and we're in the realm of 'involuntary commitment'. A section order; detention without trial. By now I'm no longer in anything like the state I was just three or four days earlier. Retelling my tale, not for the first time I'm told that my case is most unusual. "I know," I say. "I wish it weren't."

"So how do you feel today?"

"Honestly? I feel all right. I really do."

After four or five visits, I'm told that I no longer fit the criteria required to access the services of the crisis team. Not that it matters. I always come back for more.

One visit to the Royal Free lasts for a fortnight. A two-week holiday in a sixth-floor ward from which I am permitted no chance of escape, this time my circumstances are even more

embarrassing than usual. With the Beast from the East blowing its hateful breath down from Haverstock Hill, every afternoon I receive a ward call from a kindly intermediary charged with escorting me over the bridge that spans the departments of physical and mental health. Each day my young visitor tells me that as

**"I CAN BLOW THE
DOORS OFF IN AN
AFTERNOON"**

yet he's been unable to secure lodgings at a halfway house in which I will stay for seven or ten nights before once more returning home. Up and across Camden and Islington, brand-new patients are throwing themselves at police stations and hospitals; in states of mania, their need is greater than mine.

"Don't worry," I say. "I understand." One of my many problems is the timelag between my actions and their required response. As soon as I'm in the care of the professionals, I'm putting myself back together. We need to synchronise our watches, the system and me.

Up at the Royal Free, I'm surprised at just how quickly I acclimatise to days in which I do almost nothing. Curled up in bed, I watch the hockey from the Winter Olympics; after that, it's time for repeats of *Minder* and *The Sweeney*. With a longing that suggests I'm about to depart for a trip to paradise, I await the arrival of the meals ordered each morning from a sheet of photocopied paper. Chilli con carne, chicken korma, tapioca, rice pudding. Emerging from a bewildering haze of transcontinental chatter, shortly after breakfast I'm visited by the ward sister. With kind but tired patience, she tells me that, fingers crossed, this might just be the day that I'm shipped out to the halfway house. There is a name for people like me. I am a bed-blocker. Responding with muted embarrassment, by now it's obvious that there is no longer anything immediately wrong with me. After 14 barren nights, I'm dispatched home.

People are genuinely trying to help. Pulled taut like zip-wire, the component parts of the system do their best to prevent me from crashing to the floor. But, really, I'm the problem. I can't be stopped and I can't be controlled.

After I fail to appear for a gig at the Royal Albert Hall, my friend Dan bangs on the front door for 15 minutes. Just sit tight, he'll go away. "I'm not going away," he shouts through the letter box. "Ian, mate, what the fuck is going on?"

Shaking and grey, once more I'm in an ambulance en route to hospital — this time UCL on the Euston Road. Arms outstretched, with passionate reasoning I'd tried my best to convince the medics that all was peachy. But with the flat looking as if it'd been upended by a poltergeist, they were having none of it. I'm told that if I don't go voluntarily I will be removed from my home by force. By now, I'm boring even myself. Certainly I'm beaten down. The thing about all this is, it's exhausting.

At University College Hospital I'm visited by a psychiatrist. Exhaling through his nose, the man by my side disagrees with my assessment that I should be sent home to begin



CLEAN AND SOBER
Coming through
the dark times

"IAN, MATE, WHAT THE FUCK IS GOING ON?"

yet another streak of unremarkable days. As permeable as Sheffield steel, he tells me that this week's misadventure is sufficiently serious

as to require the direct intervention of the state. In his hands is a clipboard on which are written my by now impressive array of diagnoses. Once again, let's have a big hand for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, Rapid Cycling Bipolar Affective Disorder, Borderline Personality Disorder, Emotional Dysregulation Disorder and Impulse Control Disorder. Chaos. I think it's fair to say that some of these conditions are educated guesses made by an ever-increasing number of experts. Some are majority decisions.

Today I find it unhelpful to spend too much time wondering how many of these assignments actually apply to me. But then, something's

clearly wrong. The liquids and powders with which I am poisoning myself to death are merely symptomatic.

Knowing this, the man by my bedside offers me a choice. Either I agree to a transfer to a psychiatric care institution, or else he'll seek a second opinion from one of his colleagues and I'll be going there anyway under a section order. Considering my options, suddenly I feel like Captain Yossarian in *Catch-22*.

"That's some catch, that Catch-22," I'll tell him, to which the shrink will reply, "It's the best there is."

Instead, I say, "I mean, that's some pretty slim pickings."

"I'm afraid so."

A moment's silence. An express train from denial to acceptance.

"This isn't a negotiation, is it?"

"I'm afraid not." @

**EXTRACT FROM BODIES: LIFE AND DEATH IN
MUSIC, PUBLISHED BY FABER ON 21 APRIL**

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ROTTEN

TO THE

Rising star Anson Boon is playing John Lydon aka Johnny Rotten in Danny Boyle's upcoming TV miniseries *Pistol*, based on the rise and fall of the Sex Pistols. He talks to Rolling Stone UK about his family, transforming his body and mind to become the singer, and life behind the scenes of the show

BY HANNAH EWENS

PHOTOGRAPHY **JESSE DEFLORIO**
FASHION **JOSEPH KOCHARIAN**

CORE



W

HEN ANSON BOON was given the role of Johnny Rotten in Danny Boyle's Sex Pistols show *Pistol*, he immediately thought of the abundance of their knock-off merch available in Camden.

"Oh my God, I'm on a fucking Camden Market stall now!" he laughs, remembering this as he leads us up the high street. This area of north London was so fundamental to punk that despite aggressive regentrification, visual signifiers and even spiritual echoes of that period are everywhere.

Punk exploded here in the summer of 1976. On one July weekend the Ramones and The Stranglers played at the Roundhouse and Dingwalls, while Chrissy Hynde and members of The Clash, The Damned and the Sex Pistols were reportedly in the audience, all yet to make their debuts but inspired by what they witnessed.

The Sex Pistols' brief and incendiary career only lasted two years, but the band were central to establishing what punk was and the movement's legacy of melding music and politics in a way that transformed rock music. Boon wasn't aware of this history before he prepared for his role – more the classic rock photographs and neon and black typography – but is fully educated now, a punk fan at 22.

For our interview we look for a coffee shop, but at Boon's insistence, we quickly give up and go to a pub: "I want my first *Rolling Stone* interview to be in a pub with a pint in my hand," he says.

No one recognises him in the tourist-filled streets or the pub, which is busy for 2pm on a weekday, but Boon is one of the most hotly tipped actors in the country. He had other career options open to him: he was academic at school and his teachers wanted him to go to university, but he chose to study acting at college (he quickly dropped out, in favour of real-world acting experience). "I think people should always be encouraged to go and study practical things or chase their dreams," he explains. "That's something I had in common with John Lydon, because he had no easy access into the career that he went on to boss, he just chased down that dream. I had no access to acting and I just absolutely chased it because I knew I had to."

In only a few years, Boon went from one line in Netflix's *The Alienist* ("the line was 'Good evening, sir' and I charmed the director into being given it") to starring roles in the drama *Blackbird*, alongside Susan Sarandon and Kate Winslet, and the thriller *The Winter Lake* with Emma Mackey.

ANSON BOON



PREVIOUS SPREAD: ANSON WEARS JACKET, SHIRT AND TROUSERS: ALL BY DIOR; RINGS BY PAWNSHOP LONDON; THIS SPREAD: ANSON WEARS LEATHER JACKET BY SCHOTT NYC, KNIWEAR BY PAUL SMITH, FAUX-LEATHER TROUSERS BY SEPR AT MATCHESFASHION, BOOTS BY DSQUARED2



**"I HAD NO ACCESS TO ACTING AND
I JUST ABSOLUTELY CHASED IT
BECAUSE I KNEW I HAD TO"**



We speak about his journey from auditioning for *Pistol* to channelling Lydon for the role, both physically and mentally. About 15 minutes into our conversation, the middle-aged man on the table next to us is joined by his family and we go to a different table to avoid the loud chatter. “I’m sorry you have to move: I don’t know you but you have a lovely voice; it’s relaxing. I’m enjoying just listening to it,” the man tells Boon shyly.

You do have an arresting deep voice and it wasn’t what I had expected given that British actors are usually upper middle class or have successful family in the arts, so speak in Received Pronunciation.

My dad worked for a garage equipment

this connection with John Lydon was that he’s also from north London, from a really working-class family. And my mum’s family were all relocated by the council out of London before I was born. So, I kind of understood that background of being really close to your family because that’s all you have. Growing up, my cousins were all my best friends.

If you were to leave, would that be a betrayal to your family? Was pursuing acting already a betrayal?

Perhaps that’s why I haven’t moved away yet. My family are so supportive about it, but acting is so alien to us and everything I’m doing, I’m doing for us for the first time. It’s not like I’ve got parents that have seen it all before. If you grow up in London or New

“I’LL NEVER, EVER FORGET GETTING THE EMAIL WHERE THEY SAID: ‘THIS ONE NOW IS TO AUDITION FOR JOHNNY ROTTEN’”

company or something like that. My mum worked in an office as a receptionist. My mum’s from Tottenham in London and my dad’s from a farming family in the middle of nowhere. I’ve got a younger brother who works at a farm.

We’re like chalk and cheese, but I love that. And I just grew up in this really crap town in Northamptonshire. It’s a town that no one leaves.

I was always obsessed with the idea of Hollywood when I was little. My mum used to take me and my brother to the local cinema at the weekend and there was a huge water tower next to it, like what you see outside Warner Brothers and on TV. It was this idea of Hollywood that was something so far removed from where I was from and the kind of surroundings that I had.

I always knew I’d be an actor: I had no doubt. I distinctly remember one time being 10 or 11 sat in the back of my dad’s car driving over to my nan and granddad’s and I’d seen *Forrest Gump* that week and been blown away by it. I said to my dad, “I’m gonna be an actor” and I just remember thinking, “They’re laughing now, but they’ll see....”

When you say a crap town, what specifically about it is bad?

I still live there so I’ll not say the name of it, but it’s a small-town vibe. Working-class people. All the men are tradesmen, all the women either work in the school or local offices. A part of the reason I felt

York or LA or perhaps even Manchester now, even if you didn’t go to a private school or a drama-centred school, you find yourself encountering things to do with this industry.

Casting directors now will go to primary schools in parts of London that they wouldn’t have used to have gone in. They won’t do searches out of the city. I just remember feeling this huge brick wall in between me and the dreams that I wanted to achieve. I like that separation of going home and having a different life elsewhere now, but I do feel a bit like Hannah Montana sometimes.

Were your parents creative at all?



My dad was a DJ and quite involved with acid house in the 90s, always at an amateur level, but he did get paid a couple of times. He played this cool nightclub in Birmingham: Steering Wheel Club. They’re both from working-class backgrounds and didn’t have access to the kind of creative education that kids probably do now, but given the right environment, my mum and dad would’ve been creative people.

My mum is a people watcher. My mum is, in my opinion, the best judge of character out of any person I’ve ever encountered in life. She can meet someone and in five seconds she knows everything about them. People watching is a big hobby of mine, too. I’m totally reading you right now, trying to know what’s going on in your head.

I’ll try to keep my face blank then. Did you have to audition for *Pistol*?

It was my first audition that came through during the first lockdown. My phone hadn’t rung at all and since I was 18, I’ve been lucky enough that I’ve worked quite a lot. I got an email about a Danny Boyle project and immediately I was gripped. And then they told me it was a Sex Pistols show and initially they said, “Audition just for ‘general Pistol’.” You know, “We’re not gonna assign you to one yet.” So, I went in, and they gave me a monologue and four scenes and I picked two of them and then read them.

I’ll never, ever forget getting the email where they came back and said: “This one now is specifically to audition for Johnny Rotten.” And the role description, I’ve gotta get it up, ’cos it is so good. [Boon gets out his phone to find the email.] It said: “John Lydon: intense, difficult, witty, lacerating, a natural-born provocateur, classical cheekbones and a tortured angular frame, confronting and utterly compelling”. And I thought, ‘Whoa, you just sold me that character.’ And then the scene that they sent was John Lydon’s audition to be part of the Sex Pistols.

How self-referential!

An audition within an audition. And he famously was chucked in front of the rest of the band by Malcolm McLaren and asked to sing ‘I’m Eighteen’ by Alice Cooper into a shower head instead of a microphone. They sent me that and I was thinking, ‘If they’ve sent me the scene, they don’t want someone to do it half-hearted.’ I was like, ‘You know what? I’m just gonna absolutely go for this.’ And I knew that I would 100 per cent get it or that they would look at it and say: “Delete that, never send that to Danny Boyle.” I got my dad to film my audition – I’d do all my takes with my mum and dad. I’m just most relaxed with them.

That’s very sweet. How did you prepare for the role? It’s a bit of a sideways look

at the Sex Pistols but my favourite music book is *Clothes, Clothes, Clothes* by Viv Albertine. Have you read it?

Yes, I read that in prep! It's brilliant. Danny [Boyle] is a big fan of Viv Albertine as well, which made him a good fit for this. *Pistol* is anchored by Steve Jones' – the Pistols' guitarist – book, so me and Danny agreed that I should start with the script, obviously, then go to Steve's book. And then go to John's books and he's got three books.

I called upon other books like Chrissie Hynde's and Glen Matlock's just to get other people's perspectives to pull things together. Vivienne Westwood has a great documentary about her. Then I watched loads of videos and created, like, a shrine in my trailer that was just photos of Lydon all over the world, timelines, old pieces of material, Vivienne Westwood material that he used to wear and stuff, just to make me feel like I was really in it. And we had a three-month band camp as well. Do you know the band Underworld?

As in the electronic group who made the *Trainspotting* song 'Born Slippy'?

The guys that do that, they were our band coaches.

That's so fun.

It was amazing. They've worked with Danny a lot before. Karl, who writes the lyrics, draws upon his environment to write, which is what John Lydon does. And Rick, who produces the music, his whole thing is, like, manipulating sounds to make music that evokes weird emotions in people. That's also what John Lydon does. So, to work with these two was important in my building of this character.

We did this three-month band camp, all of us learned to do our instruments and I learned to sing. And I remember on the first day... Lydon speaks and sings a lot higher than me, so I couldn't sing in his octave at the start. I had to work with this vocal coach to completely elongate my vocal range. We got there in the end.

Did the filming happen in original locations across London?

We did a lot of the 'inside' stuff in this building on the South Bank, an abandoned studios ITV used to be in. Everything else was [on] location around London. We turned this abandoned road in St John's Wood into 1976 King's Road, which was amazing. We took over the Thames and we recreated the Sex Pistols riverboat moment. We filmed in the 100 Club, Hammersmith Odeon, the Marquee Club, The Roxy.

Did you play live shows to audiences in those venues then?

Yes, and because no one had been to a gig for ages, thanks to Covid, everyone was extra hyped up in the audience.



I've seen multiple *Daily Mail* articles with photos of you dressed as Lydon on set, which is amusing but not surprising given the excitement in the UK for the show.

to High Court — and lost — over the right for the show to use the Pistols' music.

You have to ask Danny Boyle... obviously I would've absolutely loved to speak to and meet John. But not being able to meet him just fuelled my ambition to chase authenticity. I just hope that if he watches it, he can recognise that every decision I made in my performance was out of sheer respect for him.

I spent so much time with John in my head and had such an intense preparation period to become him. I got down to just under eight stone. I was so involved in reading his books and got really involved in his design process. I had 14 different wigs in the end and fake teeth obviously, 'cos he famously had rotten teeth. I made sure that all the sets that revolved around his life were accurate to what he describes in his writing. I made sure that I ate food that I know he likes.

What did he eat?

Everything had to be pickled. He loved pickled beetroot. His mum used to give him leafy salads and salad cream when he was

"I SPENT SO MUCH TIME WITH JOHN IN MY HEAD AND HAD SUCH AN INTENSE PREPARATION PERIOD TO BECOME HIM"

Paparazzi pictures! The media frenzy was a tiny little fraction of a version of what it must have been like at the time. The media were loving my pink blazers and stuff like that. We did give them a cheeky finger. I think Danny advised us to.

My granddad goes up to my brother and says, "Does your mother know?" And my brother Jayden was like, "What?" And he goes, "Have you seen the paper? Anson's in the paper!" I was on one of the first pages or something like that. My family lost their minds. **Besides the preparation you've mentioned, did you meet the real Sex Pistols or key figures involved with British punk?**

Yeah, so I did things like go to Vivienne Westwood's boutique right on King's Road. It's called World's End now. I used to take trips down there just to get what it feels like to walk up and down the King's Road. I would treat myself to wacky clothes from her shop to know what that feeling is like and the intimidation of walking in there and how inspiring it is. And we got to speak to some of the real people, which was great. All the Pistols except John. **It's famously been made without Lydon's approval. He took his former bandmates**

little. Red Stripe is his favourite beer, so I made sure that I drank Red Stripe. He's left-handed and I'm right-handed and I learned to become totally left-handed, which was insane. I'm now pretty much ambidextrous. I just felt so in love with him.

Your DJ dad must have been impressed with all this intricate music culture knowledge you were acquiring.

Yes, and I think anyone that's into music has to be into this show just because it was revolutionary. The most special thing about this story was that these were four working-class, noisy boys that society was absolutely against. They weren't meant to achieve anything and somehow they revolutionised music, fashion and culture for ever.

As we've seen just walking around Camden today, you see the ransom note font everywhere. You see people dressed like them, people's hairstyles are still copying them. The aesthetic and sound were so unique and the first of its kind. My mum and my dad are just as obsessed with punk now as I am. You can see I'm obsessed with it – I'm wearing safety pins all over my bloody jackets. The Sex Pistols have influenced me for ever. @

THIS PAGE: ANSON WEARS DENIM JACKET BY ABERCROMBIE & FITCH, JEANS BY ALL SAINTS; OPPOSITE: ANSON WEARS SLEEVELESS MILITARY JACKET, LACE SHIRT, NECKLACE AND BROOCH, ALL BY SAINT LAURENT BY ANTHONY VACCARELLO; GROOMING BY BRADY LEA AT PREMIER HAIR AND MAKEUP, FASHION ASSISTANT: SACHA DANCE



Just in time

The irony of their success is not lost on Wet Leg. The viral band from Isle of Wight stopped trying to make it in music and then the pandemic project they did for themselves excited indie listeners across the country. This is their year to live up to the hype

BY HANNAH EWENS
PHOTOGRAPHY TERNA JOGO
FASHION SACHA DANCE





ISLAND GIRLS

Hester Chambers and Rhian Teasdale are still getting used to their success



RHIAN WEARS COAT BY BURBERRY, CARDIGAN BY MIU MIU AT MYTHERESA, TROUSERS AND SHOES, RHIAN'S OWN; HESTER WEARS COAT, T-SHIRT, SHOES, HESTER'S OWN, DRESS BY MONIKA THE LABEL

NEITHER RHIAN TEASDALE nor Hester Chambers intended for Wet Leg to change anything about their lives, for the music to travel anywhere. It's the sort of faux-modest suggestion most new artists make, but for them it rings true – they saw the band as a vehicle for free festival tickets.

When their video for 'Chaise Lounge' went semi-viral thanks to nostalgic millennials who had lived through 00s British indie and older people pleased that finally someone was making real guitar music again, it took the pair pleasantly by surprise. The cottagecore aesthetic and off-kilter humour felt current. Combined with the fact that everyone had spent the best part of a year and a half wasting away inside waiting for the summer of love that never happened, the debut single captured the slightly demented public mood.

The most joyous element of Wet Leg was that they seemed like two friends from the countryside having a laugh. Fun aside, what are you supposed to do if one day you're living on an island doing something to amuse yourselves and the next you're being called 'the most exciting band in the UK' off the back of a single song? To find out, we're in a bedroom in a coastal hotel on the Isle of Wight. Multiple suitcases of clothes for a photoshoot of Wet Leg are being laid out on the bed as Storm Eunice is raging outside. On the far side of the bed, Teasdale playfully puts on a bonnet and grins openly like a baby. Chambers, meanwhile, has tried on a red-and-white maxi dress and is twirling her hair expectantly. She says something quietly; she's

like a real-life pixie, her soft, high-pitched voice reaching for the opinion of her more extroverted best friend. Teasdale, who never gives anything away facially, says: "It's not super you."

"I don't really have a 'me'," whispers Chambers. After a beat, there is a chorus of "Awww!" from everyone in the room.

When it's time to take photos in the hotel room opposite, Chambers slides down the bedroom wall. She tells us she really, really doesn't like photoshoots. To suggest that we start feels worse

"We're still a bit scared. But we're feeling the fear and doing it anyway"
– Teasdale

than punishing a child; it's like sending an angel to their own personal hell.

After some initial warm-up shots on the balcony and bed, we film a video for social media. Chambers' voice is but a murmur and kindly Teasdale lowers hers to her friend's level: they act as a duo, dropping odd-ball lines and finishing each other's slow sentences. As the shoot goes on, it transpires they're not keen on the wardrobe or going to the multiple locations planned. They're both warm and chatty, but events move at an island tempo here. And in Wet Leg's world on the isle, the spiralling pace is set by them alone.

PEOPLE DON'T ALWAYS leave the Isle of Wight: only half of Wet Leg did. Teasdale used to live in Bristol and is currently in London. For her, the Isle of Wight is "OK if I'm visiting, but if it's on any kind of permanent basis, it makes me feel really claustrophobic and like a trapped teenager". Any close friends have left, bar Chambers and the rest of the band.

SISTER ACT
The pair are best friends





STORMY SEAS
Eunice is a
natural wind
machine

Chambers still lives in West Wight, though not in Wroxall, where the rumour from those both on and off the island is that people are inbred. “It’s just so weird the things that kids say with such conviction,” she says.

Teasdale adds: “I guess it’s so boring here, it’s just something to say. Just making light conversation.”

There’s little to do growing up in a strange pressure cooker where everyone knows everyone. When someone asked me if I knew Wet Leg as a joke because I’m from the Isle of Wight, I said no and then looked at a picture and did recognise Teasdale: she was a known indie teen entity who played music locally. You vaguely know of all the people your age because you don’t leave. Day excursions to the mainland for shopping or gigs are rare, unless you have the money to do so. “I just couldn’t afford it,” remembers Teasdale. “I went to the Mystery Jets

at the Wedgewood Rooms [in Portsmouth], the only thing that I remember going to there. You pay for your ticket and for the ferry and it’s 40 quid at 16.”

During festival season, the island was the place to be, when holidaymakers were over and the sun wasn’t just a concept: we boasted two of the country’s best music festivals, the Isle of Wight Festival and Bestival. “I can’t believe that we got to see Bruce Springsteen, Stevie Wonder, Elton John, Chic, The Roots, all on the Isle of Wight, I think that’s so sick,” says Chambers.

Teasdale laments that they weren’t friends at

**“Just go fake it till
you make it”
— Chambers**

15 and able to festival together – they met a little later, at music college. She also mourns that the Isle of Wight Festival line-ups aren’t what they used to be, instead feeling curiously dated and unloved. “International journalists say, ‘It’s so exciting, you’re playing the Isle of Wight Festival, such a, like, prestigious, historic festival.’ It’s a totally different reincarnation now, it’s not even, like, anything to do with it. It’s just the name.”

The pair met on a BTEC music course: Chambers was 16, Teasdale, 17. They’re now on the cusp of 30. Teasdale had started studying A levels in Sandown on the east coast of the island and then dropped out and worked at an ice-cream shop where she’d make doughnuts and microwave food for passers-by. “I think my mum was kind of upset with me and worried,” she says of leaving school. “Probably thought I’d realise it was a tough world out there and get my shit together. I thought the BTEC would be easy and I quite liked singing.”

Chambers, meanwhile, was learning the drums, but quit: “They were too loud for me, the instrument was too loud. It was bad.”

Their friendship is clearly strong, with its own sisterly, unspoken language. In 2018, Teasdale approached Chambers to ask if she would be her wing-man for her solo project. “Rhian is just a very funny and creative person, [creativity] radiates out of you ever since I’ve known you,” Chambers starts. “I’ve never had a reason to not want to do this with you, except my self-doubt I had in my abilities. I thought, ‘Why on Earth would you want me to play guitar?’ It was really scary for me, feeling really just not like the right person.”

“It’s so bullshit that it was scary for me to have asked you this,” Teasdale replies of their working relationship. “We were both just so scared. I think we’re still a bit scared. But we’re feeling the fear and doing it anyway.”

Teasdale’s project was something she had started to hate: “a bit folky, a bit deliberately sad and introspective”. There are still videos on YouTube of RHAIN: the music is highly lyrical and similarly indebted to 00s indie and the likes of Joanna Newsom and Regina Spektor. “I started to be, like, ‘Why am I doing this?’ And then it was just so fun playing with Hester: drive and listen to music, play a festival, thank you for the free beer. After a summer rolling around fields, a bit worse for wear, I feel like I got to know you a lot better.”

Chambers adds: “You held my hair back from me when I drank too much beer. I would’ve held your hair back for you if you ever vomited.”

Thankfully, Teasdale has a very strong stomach. Although, she says, Chambers did support her through the “creaky coat situation”. This happened at Shambala Festival where many stories of this nature occur. “I dunno how you’d write about this in your magazine,” Teasdale says, “but I took an illegal substance and was wearing this PVC fur collar and the rest of it was

DOUBLE TROUBLE

The women outside the hotel



really stiff. I thought I was a pencil. I literally felt so enclosed, but then, like, I had this nice fur collar. I was like: ‘I can’t move. I can’t move.’ Then I was being propelled into the ground. I was like, ‘Hester, help. I’m freaking out.’”

From there, the idea of doing Wet Leg came up organically between them. “It’s quite scary ‘cos if you like someone, you can have the idea, but don’t get too excited because it really might not happen,” says Chambers of its conception. “Life just gets in the way of that stuff so easily. So, it’s a bit cool that actually we said it and then did it.”

According to Teasdale, they said they’d start a band before but it didn’t happen: “We were too scared.” Or you self-sabotage by not making time for it and then say you were too busy. “Yeah,” Teasdale nods. “Part of it was that we were like, ‘Oh, we’re too old to do anything with music now. We’re pretty happy in our jobs.’ We got to the point in our lives where we were really enjoying life. But let’s do some music so that we can go to festivals in the summer and hold each other’s hair back.”

Fashion lover Teasdale was working in “commercial land, take the money and run”: dressing people for adverts. She liked the heavy lifting and the busy nature of the work. She started three or four years ago after back-to-back waitressing jobs and since it was still a new world to her, was enamoured with styling people for a living. “‘Ah, they want a street cleaner. Great. I’ll get my go-to street cleaner outfit together’ or ‘They want a granny – I’ll rummage in the studio.’ It was dressing characters.” A connection she had from the island got her the first job. “She told me, ‘You need to be confident on set. Tell me that you’re confident on set.’ I had no idea.”

Chambers encourages her in real time: “It’s OK. Just go fake it till you make it.”

They’ve both had to give up their jobs because they don’t have time, though Chambers in particular misses her work as a jewellery maker and repairer. It’s boring but she loves the quiet repetitiveness of it.

“I think that’s probably what I liked about my job,” says Teasdale. “It’s so hectic that it—”

Chambers smiles and finishes her sentence: “—takes your brain to another dimension.”

THE VIDEO FOR ‘Chaise Lounge’ was made before Wet Leg were signed by Domino, home to indie darlings like Arctic Monkeys, Fat White Family and Sorry. As was their new single ‘Angelica’ and its video, along with their self-titled debut album in full. Despite this complete package on offer, they were surprised at being signed at all during the pandemic.

“Usually A&R people go to see multiple gigs to really get the full picture, but we couldn’t play any gigs. And apparently it wasn’t, like,

“I shared so many hang-ups”
— Chambers

that much of a problem for them,” explains Chambers. They’d only played four gigs to date and Domino didn’t come to those. “It was a bit scary...[Wet Leg] is probably the one thing I’ve ever done with freedom.” She turns to Teasdale. “I shared so many hang-ups, but you were telling me this was a safe space and I believe you.”

“It’s not a safe space any more,” adds Teasdale.



CROWN JEWELS
Chambers and the jewellery she made herself



WORLD OF THEIR OWN
Wet Leg chat between themselves

HESTER WEARS T-SHIRT AND BOOTS, HESTER'S OWN. DRESS BY MONIKA THE LABEL; RHIAN WEARS CARDIGAN BY MIU MIU AT MYTHERESA, TROUSERS AND SHOES, RHIAN'S OWN

**AYE, AYE
SAILOR**

Wet Leg on the
balcony



Hang-ups about what? Being photographed? “Everything,” says Chambers. “I can be insecure about singing and playing and writing songs or photographs.”

But on the Isle of Wight, no one does anything strange and if you begin an artistic endeavour, everyone knows about it and judges it immediately, Teasdale points out. “But it doesn’t matter because we won’t do it for any reason other than ourselves,” Teasdale says. “Music was cool, but it was something that I did before. This was not giving it up completely, not erasing it from my identity. Because it does feel like that when you stop a project.”

The insularity and innocence of the first lockdown on the island was the ideal safe space for the pair to create Wet Leg. They could reflect on the past but also make something that articulated where they were at now, suspended in time, as the pandemic stretched on indefinitely. Their album cover depicts them in school uniforms, and lyrics on multiple songs are reminiscent of university or teenage years to speak to their child-like entry into proper adulthood around 30 – or rather, show how similar the reality is for a generation without the means to grow up.

“There’s a lyric ‘Now I’m almost 28, still getting off my fucking tits’,” Teasdale trails off. “I just remember going on benders – for want of a better word – ten years ago. When you are ten years younger, you don’t have this disenchanted guilt, ‘I should probably get my shit together.’ When you are coming of age, like with *Skins* and *Euphoria*, it’s all so glamourised and then you get past 27 and you can’t just be hanging out with 20-year-olds, getting off your face. I mean, you can, but you feel that you just don’t have as much time. I feel there’s certainly a sense of running out of time. And I think it’s kind of funny that we made the band as like: ‘Oh, we’ve run out of time. Let’s make a We’ve Run Out of Time band.’ Would you agree? Or am I like...”

Chambers nods – that’s how what they do can feel so light when it’s the pair of them. It’s what allows them to run around with lobster arms in videos and make off-beat post-punk without worrying what nosey islanders say.



“There was no judgement upon ourselves,” Teasdale continues. “There was no ‘Is this actually good? Well, it doesn’t matter ‘cos we’re never gonna get anywhere.’”

They’re still learning what being in a hype band means: travelling the world, playing sold-out shows in America, trying to wash some of the mounting pile of clothes when they’re home or to see a single friend between flights, wondering whether there’s enough downtime to

mend some jewellery for people. It’s also critics being excited about your debut album above most other releases of the year for its sense of humour, and facing a hotly anticipated headline tour of your own across the US.

On a plane the other day, Teasdale and Chambers had their heads together looking at their camera roll. Nothing from the past six months makes sense to them: acting in new music videos, promoting music to Australians, celebrating coming second in the BBC Sound of 2022 poll, wriggling along hotel-room corridors in America, gasping at billboards with their faces on in LA. “This is such a learning curve it feels really bizarre,” says Teasdale. “Just looking through our camera thinking: ‘How is life like this? This is so funny.’”

**“There’s a sense of
running out of time”
– Teasdale**

HER VULNERABLE
SONGWRITING MADE
HER A STAR. MAKING
HER PEACE WITH
WHAT THAT MEANT
WAS HARDER

By Angie Martoccio

Mitski

Had to Quit Music to Love It

Photographs by *Josefina Santos*

HEARTBREAKER
Mitski in New York, 2021



M

ITSKI HAS BEEN having nightmares. The 31-year-old musician has always suffered from performance-anxiety dreams, but lately they've become more terrifying, more elaborate. During one in particular, her cat was stuck in a tree, and she was late to soundcheck. When she finally arrived at the venue, she found out she'd be performing with an orchestra she'd never rehearsed with.

"Everyone was side-eyeing me," she recalls. "As I was trying to do vocal warmups, the whole orchestra was like, 'That's a good idea!' and started doing vocal warmups, too. I couldn't hear myself, so I kept trying to go deeper and deeper into the venue... and then I got lost."

Perhaps the dreams are about the fact that Mitski is preparing to return to the road after nearly two years at home. Or maybe it's because the last time she was on a stage, in late 2019, it was supposed to be the final show of her career. Either way, on second thoughts, she'd rather not talk about it. "Talking about dreams is boring, isn't it?" she asks.

For the most alluring and enigmatic musician in indie rock, that's hardly the case. Mitski's music speaks to something deep within her audience, from the devotees who tattoo her lyrics on their bodies to the more casual fans who created so many TikToks featuring her 2018 single 'Nobody' that pop-culture sites were forced to run explainers. She answers the door today in low-key, civilian clothes – light-wash denim jeans, a lavender long-sleeved shirt, and primrose

Mitski

Brooks running shoes – that are a slight shock after the last time the world saw her, in her onstage costume from two years ago of biker shorts and knee pads.

It's early November, and we're meeting at the Bomb Shelter, a studio in Nashville. Halloween is over, and she isn't happy about it. "Maybe I'll watch a horror movie," she says. "I can make October last as long as I want."

Walking inside the Bomb Shelter feels like entering a friend's secret clubhouse – or maybe it's what *Succession*'s Kendall Roy wanted the VIP section of his 40th-birthday party to actually look like. The space is cosy, with vinyl-record sleeves covering the wood walls and ceiling. Plants that have seen better days adorn the kitchen counter, next to a cast-iron skillet hanging from a shelf and a gigantic jug of honey on top of a microwave. Margo Price's family Christmas card is taped next to a fire extinguisher.

Mitski makes me a cup of sencha tea while mumbling corny jokes, boiling water ("You know what they say about a watched pot...") and pouring it into a mug with the iconic New York logo ("Do you *love* New York?"). She moved to Nashville two years ago, though she told virtually no one about it at the time. "I think I'm becoming attached to Nashville," she says thoughtfully. "I didn't want to do L.A. or New York, because I felt I shouldn't live in incredibly competitive, expensive cities when I'm quitting my job."

Except Mitski didn't quit. It was here, in this studio, that she made a new album and realised she still had a lot left to create.

MITSKI KNEW THE STAKES were high when she performed to a sold-out crowd at Summerstage in New York's Central Park on 8 September 2019. It was the final night of her tour for 2018's acclaimed *Be the Cowboy*, and when she'd announced it as her last show "indefinitely", her fans had freaked out, to put it mildly. Memes of crying animals with the single word "yeehaw" and declarations like "I'm so glad I'm seeing her this week or else I would've died right here and now" were not uncommon. The reaction was so frenzied that she had to issue a clarification on Twitter weeks before the show: "Y'all, I'm not quitting music!" she wrote. "I've been on non-stop tour for over five years, I haven't

had a place to live during this time, & I sense that if I don't step away soon, my self-worth/identity will start depending too much on staying in the game, in the constant churn."

It was all true – except for the first part. In reality, Mitski fully intended to leave the music business behind for good after that night. "I was thinking this was the last show I would perform ever, and then I would quit and find another life," she says now. This is probably why it turned out to be one of the greatest performances of her career – it felt precious, finite. The crowd seemed a little more hypnotised than usual, her signature choreography a little too sharp. "This is all I ever wanted in my life," she told the audience that had just watched her lie faceup on a table, singing into the night sky.

"It was beautiful," Mitski says. "I performed, and I remembered how much I loved it. And I remember walking offstage, and I immediately started crying. Like, 'What have I done?'"

Lucy Dacus, who opened for Mitski that night, remembers that Mitski seemed muted as she left the stage. "I asked her, 'How do you feel?'" Dacus says. "The first thing she said was, 'Oh, I've made a huge mistake.' She verbalised it, and I felt a shade of terror for her."

Looking back on it now, Mitski says the long years of nonstop touring weren't the real reason she wanted to quit. Even when life on the road can be exhausting, it's nothing a break between album cycles can't fix. Many artists stay home, log off social media and recharge, before eventually turning to new projects. For Mitski, it was more complicated than that. *Be the Cowboy* had turned her into an indie star – the kind whose fans feel an intense connection with a person they've never

met – and she was grappling with what that meant for her life.

"I felt it was shaving away my soul little by little," she says. "The music industry is this supersaturated version of consumerism. You are the product being consumed, bought and sold. Even the people on your team who are your friends, the very foundation of your dynamic is that they get a percentage of your income. Every time I turned something down, it would mean that they would make less money."

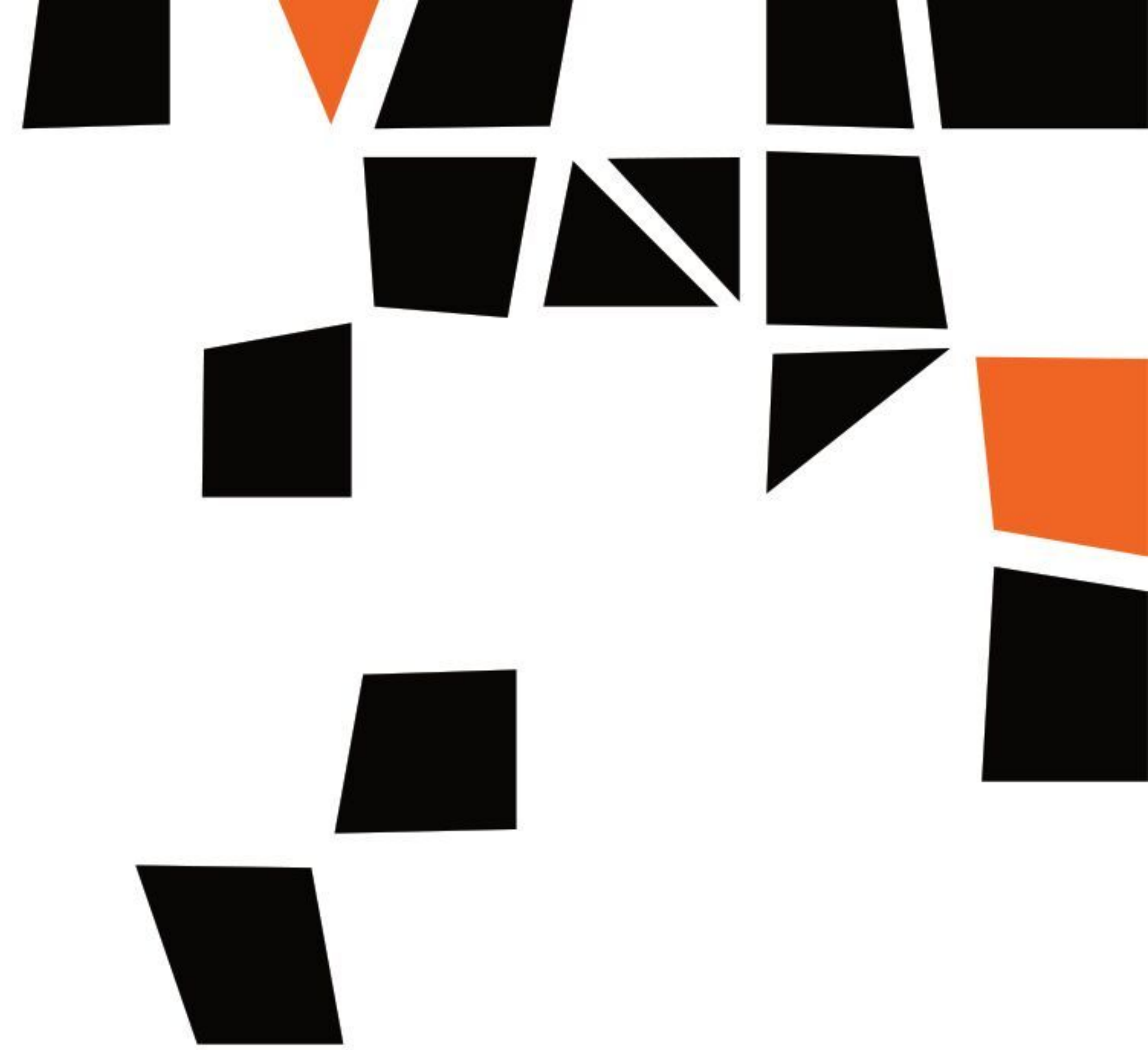
Mitski is speaking slowly now, trying to

"In order for me to survive in the music industry, I had to stuff a pillow over my heart and be like, 'Shut up.' After a few years, my heart really did go numb"

FASHION DIRECTION BY ALEX BADIA, HAIR STYLED BY BRITTAN WHITE FOR EXCLUSIVE ARTISTS, MAKEUP BY TODD HARRIS FOR HONEY ARTISTS USING SUOQU COSMETICS, SET DESIGN BY ELISIA MIRABELLI FOR B&A REPS, STYLED BY LIZZY ROSENBERG, PREVIOUS SPREAD: DRESS BY THREEASFOUR; THIS SPREAD: BODY CAST BY KIM MESCHES, DRESS, BODYSUIT AND TROUSERS BY MELITTA BAUMEISTER







Mitski

recall the series of events. Not only is it her first interview since before the pandemic, but, she says, the isolation of lockdown made her memory worse than it already is. (“It got so bad, to the point where I was living in a white room with nothing in it,” she says.) She’s sitting on a charcoal couch at the Bomb Shelter in socks, her shoes neatly positioned on the floor in front of her. She ordered vegan doughnuts from Five Daughters Bakery, cutting two in half for us on the nearby coffee table.

“In order for me to survive in the music industry as it exists, I had to stuff a pillow over my heart and tell it to stop screaming, and be like, ‘Shut up, shut up, take it,’” she says finally. “After a few years of doing that every single day, my heart really did start to go numb and go silent. And the problem with that is that I actually need my heart – my feelings – in order to write music. It was this paradox.”

Being a popular musician, it seems, worked for her until one day it simply didn’t. “This is what really made me quit,” she says. “I could see a future self, who would put out music for the sake of keeping the machine running. And that really scared me.”

MITSKI CLAIMS SHE is “bad at naming things,” but her five previous albums suggest otherwise. Her titles (*Retired from Sad*, *New Career in Business*; *Bury Me at Makeout Creek*; *Puberty 2*) form a wry running commentary on twentysomething angst, raw desire, and often unrequited love. She named her latest, *Laurel Hell*, after a folk term for the thickets of mountain laurel found deep in the southern Appalachians. The flowers are gorgeous, like little rhododendrons, but the plant is poisonous, with low, twisted branches that are impossible to pass through. “There are laurel hells that are named after people who died in them, supposedly,” she says.

Although she’s never seen one in person, the concept of trying to break free of such an entanglement appealed to Mitski. “It was just too perfect,” she says. “I’m stuck inside this maze...I can’t get out, but it’s beautiful.” This imagery trickles into the first line of *Laurel Hell*, which Mitski sings in a tone as spooky as the films she binges on her Shudder account: “*Let’s step carefully into the dark...*” She explains the song as a

metaphor for the way her art exposes her secrets. “I don’t show even the people I love most, but I’ll show you this darkness in me,” she tells me.

Mitski wrote ‘Working for the Knife’, the single that marked her return to music, toward the end of 2019. Only a few weeks earlier, she’d been sure she was exiting the

music business, but she’d since been reminded that she owed her label, Dead Oceans, another record. “I contractually had to release it,” she says. “I just didn’t know whether I would ask the label to take it and keep me out of it, or I would actually go out and present it.”

By early 2020, she had made up her mind. ‘Working for the Knife’ details her painful reluctance to return to the stage over ominous synths: “*I used to think I’d be done by 20/Now at 29, the road ahead appears the same.*”

In the song’s video, Mitski silently enters a

Brutalist concrete auditorium and sheds her cowboy hat – a cheeky send-off to her *Be the Cowboy* era – before working up to a stylised outburst of choreography, slamming her palms on the floor, chaotically jumping up and down, and thrusting her head every which way so her hair becomes a shiny, majestic blur. The camera closes in on her at the end, exhausted and sprawled on the ground. “What it came down to was, ‘I have to do this even though it hurts me, because I love it,’” Mitski says. “‘This is who I am....I’m going to keep getting hurt, and I’m still going to do it, because this is the only thing I can do.’”

Mitski describes ‘Working for the Knife’ as the beacon of the record, the compass she’d use to find her way back if she veered off the path. Because *Laurel Hell* is the longest she’s ever spent on an album – most of the songs were written in 2018 – this happened quite a lot.

“This album went through so many iterations,” she says. “This album has been a punk record at some point, and a country record. Then, after a while, it was like, ‘I need to dance.’ Even though the lyrics might be depressing, I need something peppy to get me through this.”

‘The Only Heartbreaker’ is a disco-ball rager that sounds like Kate Bush meets A-ha. “I needed that *Breakfast Club*

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dance-sequence music,” she says. She wrote it with Semisonic’s Dan Wilson, the professional hitmaker who has worked with Taylor Swift, Adele, the Chicks and others; their collaboration marks Mitski’s first time having a co-writer on one of her albums. “That was a real struggle,” she says. “I’d held on so long to my music being mine.”

The song had gone through at least 20 revisions and was about to be left off the record entirely before Mitski met Wilson in Los Angeles, during a co-writing session for other musicians. “The song was sitting in my head for too long and rotting,” she recalls. “I was like, ‘This is a person who has much more experience than me. Maybe I could punt this to him.’ And I’m glad I did, because he did come through and lead me to conclusions that I wouldn’t have arrived at otherwise.”

Lyrical, what makes ‘The Only Heartbreaker’ so potent is that it flips the traditional pop-songwriting narrative in which the protagonist is hurt and we take their side – a perspective that Mitski has nailed on past songs, like the subtly spellbinding ‘Washing Machine Heart’ and the lovesick anthem ‘Your Best American Girl’. This time, she embraces the role of the bad guy.

“I’ve often found myself in a situation where, narratively speaking, I’m the bad guy,” she says. “We can acknowledge more than just black and white. If you present something that feels true to you, there will be other people who are like, ‘This is true to me, too.’”

WHEN MITSKI Miyawaki was a child, she went through a phase where she would start every sentence with “No,” for reasons that still puzzle her today. “You’d be like, ‘Do you like apples?’” she remembers. “I’d be like, ‘No! I like apples.’ I guess that’s an easy way to get someone’s attention, or assert yourself immediately.”

It’s an endearing memory that paints

the portrait of a young Mitski. Her father worked in the US State Department, so her family moved frequently, living everywhere from Japan, where she was born, to Turkey to Alabama. She was always the new kid, the one who told unsolicited ghost stories to her peers and woke up first at sleepovers. “I ran into the parent in the kitchen and small-talked, and put breakfast together for myself while everyone else was sleeping,” she recalls with a smile. “I was *that* kid.”

In the eight years she’s spent getting national press, Mitski has frequently been described as “private”. She avoids talking in detail about her family, saying that her parents are retired and her little sister is “a really good person,” and she kindly requests that I don’t reveal her cat’s name for fear of being tracked down. “The stuff I’m not candid about is when it affects other people,” she says. “I have people in my life who aren’t in the public, and I don’t feel like I have a right to talk about them when they never consented to this dynamic.” But the truth is that Mitski is quite candid and open – during our many hours together, she never once declines to answer a question. It’s time to debunk the idea that she’s an especially secretive person, and she’d like to have a word about it.

“I have developed this theory about this,” she begins. “When the world put me in this position, I didn’t realise that I was making this deal where in exchange for giving me this platform and attention, I was supposed to give myself.”

That’s not how it worked in the world where she began playing music, she continues: “I came from a DIY punk scene where there are a bunch of white-guy bands, and they got to just put out music, go on tour, and then go home. I thought that applied to me. I didn’t realise that I was breaking this contract that I’d entered into. Keeping some things to myself makes people very, very angry. Because they might not be conscious of it, but they think I have not come through on my end of the deal.”

She references the infamous *Esquire*

profile of Megan Fox from 2013, where the writer compared the star to a human sacrifice. “It was ridiculed at the time, but I thought it made a good point,” she says. “We have it hard-wired in our brain that we need this ritual. We prop up a beautiful woman and then shit on her and destroy her. Thankfully, I am 31 now, so maybe I don’t qualify any more.”

Mitski turned 30 in September 2020, and celebrated at home in lockdown. “No exaggeration, I woke up and shed one single tear because I was so fucking glad to be out of my twenties,” she says. She spent much of that year making vegan baked goods (particularly pies), bingeing horror films and gardening. “The real me is not living some idealised life,” she says. “I’m just on a couch, watching TV. My fans should not meet me because they would be disappointed.”

She finds it comforting to think of the space that separates the person watching *The Haunting of Hill House* and planting cucumbers from the artist whose music has magnetised Iggy Pop and Dave Grohl. “I wouldn’t say it’s an alter ego, but I have anxiety around social situations, and I don’t like going to parties,” she says. “As a performer, onstage I know my place. I’m sure of myself. There’s no doubt. It’s just existing, and it’s so lovely to get to be for an hour.”

WE MEET UP the next day at Shelby Bottoms Park and embark on a four-mile walk along the Cumberland River. Mitski fits in like a local, arriving in a forest-green fleece sweater with a black backpack, ready to show me around.

While strolling by wetlands and plants both native and invasive, we discuss *Moonstruck* (“Nicolas Cage looks like some sort of god in that movie”) and TikTok (“I don’t want to put too much pressure on Gen Z, but we’re really counting on them”). Mitski is upbeat and animated, mocking a woodpecker with furious head movements and stopping to observe pink lace underwear on the ground. But the artist within her makes an appearance every now and then, like when the conversation turns to bats. I say the winged creatures are both ugly and cute, and she turns around and looks at me intently through her glasses: “Beauty is horror, right?”

Mitski immersed herself in music

growing up, listening to the Spice Girls as a kid and singing in a choir through high school. “I remember I auditioned in seventh grade for a short solo part,” she recalls. “The teacher and everyone looked at me. I was like, ‘Oh, this is something I can do.’” She discovered more of her talent when she wrote her first song on piano at 18. “I’m sure a lot of teenagers experience this,” she says. “I didn’t see a purpose in myself, and then I was able to write this song. It was just a relief.”

But she still didn’t have enough confidence to pursue music in college, so she became a film major instead. “I was surrounded by people who genuinely wanted to make movies, and meanwhile, I was sneaking into the music department’s practice rooms every day,” she says. “It was a wake-up call.”

She transferred from Manhattan’s Hunter College to SUNY Purchase, an hour north, for her sophomore year, enrolled in the music course, and met Patrick Hyland, who has produced all of her albums following her self-released 2012 debut, *Lush*. “Making an album is a vulnerable process for me,” she says. “I have to allow myself to be weak and

ugly, and I find it hard to do that in front of just anyone. But I’ve done it enough with Patrick that I trust him.”

Hyland recently pointed out to Mitski that she makes records “in twos”, exploring an idea on one album and elaborating on it with the next. “*Lush* was in college, like, ‘Oh, my gosh, there are studios! There are other instrumentalists!’ And then *Retired from Sad, New Career in Business* was taking orchestral instruments and refining piano music. *Bury Me at Makeout Creek* was very DIY, punk-influenced, and guitar-driven because I had left school. I didn’t have any more of those

resources. I just had a guitar that I was learning how to play.”

By this point, Mitski was gaining a devoted audience with her bare-bones, emotionally turbulent performances at bygone New York venues like Shea Stadium and the Silent Barn. On her next album, 2016’s *Puberty 2*, she perfected that sound, from the quiet and brutally honest ‘I Bet on Losing Dogs’ to the ecstatic punk outburst ‘My Body’s Made of Crushed Little Stars’, and won even more renown. “Her music is really visceral,” Dacus says.

—
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 —



Mitski

“She’s connected to a part in herself that wants to scream. Maybe you don’t live in a space where you can scream, or maybe you don’t have the words for what has happened to you. Mitski provides a space for that.”

Naturally, Mitski went in the opposite direction next, largely putting aside power chords and screams for *Be the Cowboy*, in favour of disco chic and understated songs about loneliness and pining. That pining is usually for a kiss – “*I just need someone to kiss*” (‘Nobody’), “*Somebody kiss me, I’m going crazy*” (‘Blue Light’), “*I know I’ve kissed you before, but I didn’t do it right*” (‘Pink in the Night’) – which has inspired some very funny fan-made memes. “It’s very Old Hollywood: ‘Let’s make this kiss mean so much because we can’t show any more,’” she says. “I always feel like a kiss is so much more intimate than any other act. Maybe

because it’s one of the first acts you do with somebody, so it’s the most special.”

Puberty 2 won her an opening slot on Lorde’s *Melodrama* tour and rocketed Mitski to an entirely different level of fame and audience; in the weeks before she came back with ‘Working for the Knife’, she had an impressive 6.8 million monthly Spotify listeners. While she’s grateful for that success – “Everything I say is with the caveat that I’m a one-in-a-million luckiest person in the literal world” – she can’t hide the fact that it began to weigh heavily on her. Thinking back on her *Be the Cowboy* tour, she says, “I was just trying to get through it every day. I was disassociated through most of that.”

In the past year, as she’s planned her return with *Laurel Hell*, Mitski spent time setting boundaries for herself and being aware of her limitations. She’s even worked with her team to ensure that

her schedule has mandatory breaks so she can eat and unwind. (In December, weeks after this interview, it was reported in *Billboard* that her management company had dissolved following a sexual-harassment allegation against her manager. A representative for Mitski says that this person is “currently transitioning out of the role of being Mitski’s manager”; the manager did not respond to a request for comment.)

“I think this break has been good for me,” she says. “I had physically neglected my health because I was on tour so much. I didn’t have health insurance. Basically during all of my twenties, I had no time or space to figure out who I am. I needed to actually figure out how to take care of my body.”

WE EXIT THE PARK and catch an Uber for a late lunch at the East Nashville vegan restaurant Wild Cow. Our driver

is incredibly chatty, explaining that the increased rent in Nashville recently caused him to move to nearby Hendersonville. Mitski seems genuinely interested in the conversation, asking follow-up questions like “How long have you been here?” and “Have you noticed traffic getting worse?”

Within minutes, the driver reveals he’s a struggling musician, whose Southern-rock band of seven years broke up during the pandemic. He tells Mitski all about his plans to become a singer-songwriter, his new producer, and the pitfalls of the streaming industry. “What do y’all do for a living?” he asks. “I guess we’re in music too,” she says.

She seems comfortable with herself these days – as if, after running away from her career and then choosing to resurrect it, she’s made peace with what it means to be on her level of success. “I guess fame is relative,” she tells me earlier. “There’s Taylor Swift fame and then there’s local-DIY-scene fame. The real struggle for me in getting bigger is, how do I maintain integrity in the performance? How do I make sure the audience experience is still intimate and emotional in this 8,000-cap room? How do I not resort to flashy pyrotechnics onstage? Because I don’t want my show to be about that – I want people to enter into a place with me and have an experience, and then leave having experienced something important.”

As we reach the restaurant, the driver drops us off without realising he just spoke to one of the biggest names in indie rock. “Good luck,” Mitski says, shutting the door. “I’m sorry about your band!” ®

A Raging Civil War.



1,200 Tons of Chemical Weapons.



Nine Months to Destroy Them.

How four women you've
never heard of helped avert
a global crisis and saved
untold lives **By Tessa Stuart**
Illustration by Joan Wong



A

MEENAH SAWWAN WAS up late on 21 August 2013, scrolling through Facebook on her phone, when she saw the first report that a town not far from hers had been hit by a chemical attack. She watched footage from Eastern Ghouta, then saw another post that said that her hometown, Moadamiyat al-Sham, had been hit as well. She started tapping out a reply in the comments: “This is wrong. This is fake news. I’m in Moadamiyat and we were not hit by chemicals.” Then she started hearing screams.

Sawwan and her family – 12 of them were living together at the time – ran outside, but shortly after they did, mortar shells began raining down. They didn’t know where to go next. “It felt like the sky was falling,” Sawwan says.

She made her way to a nearby field hospital – a glorified basement stocked with scavenged medical supplies – stopping along the way to run her hands over her body and make sure she hadn’t been hit by shrapnel. When she got there, bodies were splayed on the asphalt outside as men with hoses sprayed them down.

Inside the hospital, she remembers, “There was barely a place to put a foot. It’s dark, full of screams, and people being washed, and the smell of vinegar.” The medical staff were shouting directives: “Take their clothes off, wash their bodies, try to do CPR.” At one point, she was handed a 10-month-old baby, but she could not revive the infant. “Nobody knew what they were doing, but you have to do something.”

Sarin – the colourless, odourless nerve agent dropped that night on civilians in the suburbs of Damascus – was developed in the 30s by German chemists as a pesticide. Exposure will trigger watery eyes, pinpoint pupils, a tightness in the chest in seconds, then paralysis, respiratory failure, and death. In 2013, the Syrian government reportedly possessed several hundred tons

CRIME AGAINST HUMANITY

In 2013, Assad’s forces unleashed sarin gas on their own people, killing more than 1,400; (right) Sawwan, who tended to the injured



of the stuff, plus hundreds more tons of mustard gas and VX, another nerve agent.

The 21 August assaults that killed more than 1,400 Syrians were carried out one year, nearly to the day, after President Obama’s casual declaration that Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad’s use of chemical weapons was a “red line”, one that would change his “calculus” on America’s involvement in the country’s civil war. It was a clear threat: if Assad gassed his own people, the US would respond with force – and that threat was particularly loaded, given the fact that Syria is a client state of Russia’s. To many observers, it seemed plausible that Obama’s words – and Assad’s blatant disregard for them – could drag the US, Russia, and both of their allies into a full-blown global conflict. But then something unexpected happened. Instead of dropping bombs on Syria, the United States cut a deal, through Russia, that would force Assad to give up his chemical-weapons stockpile. And then something even more unexpected happened: it actually worked.

The unlikely solution would ultimately involve the cooperation of 17 countries,

the warp-speed work of a small cohort of US Army chemists, and squabbling and infighting within the highest echelons of the US government. It headed off US military intervention in Syria and helped earn the Nobel Peace Prize for the intergovernmental organisation under whose banner it was carried out. But before all that, the kernel of the idea – to destroy Assad’s chemical arsenal on a boat in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea – and the duty of seeing it through began with a team of anonymous young women in a dismal office, burrowed deep inside an obscure federal agency.

“There certainly were a lot of other people – hundreds of people – that had to do this,” says Gen. Jay Santee, the former deputy director of the Defense Threat Reduction Agency (DTRA). “[But] it would not have happened without these women. At all. In any way, shape or form.”

THREE WEEKS AFTER the attack, Chelsea Goldstein showed up to work at a joyless cubicle farm in Northern Virginia at 4 a.m.. Someone had brought in doughnuts. The building was mostly empty – budget sequestration was in effect, and Department of Defense employees, like the rest of the federal workforce, were furloughed at least one day a week.

Goldstein had joined DTRA fresh out of college three years earlier, and for the past six months she had been part of a ragtag team tasked with nothing more than a complex thought experiment: how might the military go about securing and destroying a massive stockpile of chemical weapons?

Now, she stood jaw agape, doughnut in hand, as she and her co-workers watched US Secretary of State John Kerry and Sergey Lavrov, Russia’s foreign minister, announce on TV that Syria had agreed to give up its cache of chemical weapons.

PREVIOUS SPREAD: PHOTOGRAPHS IN ILLUSTRATION BY CHIEF MASS COMMUNICATION SPECIALIST MIKEL BOOKWALTER/US NAVY, GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO, GETTY IMAGES, 2; THIS PAGE: BASSAM KHABIEH/REUTERS/ALAMY



The entire disarmament process was to be completed within nine months. “We had no idea that such an agreement might come to pass,” Goldstein recalls. “But we were the only team in the government working on this problem, so... giddyap! This is really happening.”

A front-page story in *The New York Times* underscored the enormity of the pact, reached during a hastily arranged diplomatic summit in Geneva. “This situation has no precedent,” a chemical-weapons expert told the paper. “They are cramming...six years’ worth of work into a period of several months, and they are undertaking this in an ongoing civil war.”

The deteriorating security situation wasn’t the only obstacle the team had been considering as they weighed possible options. Terrorist groups like the Al-Nusra Front and the Islamic State were taking root in corners of the country. And there was an additional complicating factor that, until now, Syria had denied possessing such weapons at all, so any information about the amount, condition, and location of Assad’s

arsenal was based on speculative reports.

From the very beginning, it had seemed like an impossible job, which might be why some of the government’s experienced operators – men who had spent decades in and out of former Soviet republics, demilitarising barrels of chemical and biological warfare agents – considered it a waste of their time. Instead, the core team that began working to put together a plan was composed of people who looked much like Goldstein: young women with virtually no background in chemical-weapons destruction.

In a Defense Department organisation like DTRA, where men typically outnumber women roughly two to one, the gender composition of the team stood out – and earned it the nickname “Toast’s Angels” for commanding officer Col. John Cinnamon. An Air Force pilot with the call sign Toast (“It’s funny for an aviator because that’s [what they call it] when you die,” Cinnamon deadpans), he had recently been charged with cobbling together the Syria task force. He didn’t set out to create “an all-women



(Clockwise from top) Bodies in Ghouta; a medic treats a victim

superteam”, Cinnamon says. He was looking for highly competent volunteers, and found women raised their hands. “There was hesitation from some folks, because the notion was we were going to fail, and we were gonna fail colossally. In general, the people willing to take that risk and see where this went were all women. The guys were more failure-averse.”

Two of the women were civilians in their mid-twenties, the other two were military officers fresh off maternity leave, and only

one of the four had anything remotely resembling relevant experience. What they did have, after months of grappling with the particulars, was a firm grasp of just how difficult it would be to execute the mission the secretary of state had just committed to, even more so under the aggressive time constraints to which he'd agreed.

FORT BELVOIR IN suburban Virginia looks more like a mid-Atlantic college than an Army base home to dozens of Department of Defense agencies and more daily workers than the Pentagon. The Defense Threat Reduction Agency has a relatively small footprint at the base – just 2,000 employees – but it maintains a sprawling portfolio: any and all business of or relating to countering weapons of mass destruction, chemical, biological, or nuclear.

DTRA has existed, in one form or another, since at least the Manhattan Project, evolving as the United States' defence priorities have shifted. From the dawn of the Cold War until the fall of the Berlin Wall, its various precursors were charged with researching and developing new uses for nuclear technology. When the collapse of the Soviet Union left unsecured nuclear material littered across 11 time zones, the focus shifted towards containment efforts.

For example, when an earthquake off the coast of Japan triggered a tsunami that flooded the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant, DTRA was the agency responsible for helping to coordinate the response, cleanup and strategy. When Libyan rebels overthrew the government, emissaries from DTRA were the ones who showed up with suitcases full of cash to hire guards to protect the country's chemical stockpile. When a semitruck transporting any amount of chemicals is jackknifed, there's a good chance someone at DTRA is doing a plume analysis, figuring out if the elements on board will transform into a deadly cocktail or just harmless sludge.

Julia Limage didn't know any of this as she wound her way through a career fair inside a cavernous D.C. convention centre in the summer of 2012. Limage, then in her mid-twenties, had already dropped off copies of her résumé at every

environmental- and public-health-adjacent job she could find when she decided to stop by the table of an obscure federal agency she'd never heard of. A few hours later, she was ushered into a tent for an interview at the agency, conducted by a Marine pilot, a scientist, and a buttoned-up project manager. The men were vague about the role in question but they offered cryptically: "We've got some bio projects – a lot of it's classified. We think you might be a good fit."

As a kid, Limage knew that when she grew up she wanted to be "working to save the planet. It was the 90s – that was very in." She was raised in Bethesda, Maryland; her mother was a lawyer for the State Department, and her father helped write portions of the Endangered Species Act before becoming a science adviser in the Clinton administration. She'd gone off to college, then completed a PhD in biology at Yale before returning to D.C. for a fellowship that placed recent graduates in government jobs. She ended up getting two offers from

the fair, including one at the State Department, which she turned down in favour of the enigmatic gig at the agency she'd never heard of.

She showed up to work that summer at a DTRA office called "Innovative Technologies" that was responsible for finding and enlisting partners to try their hand at solving difficult military problems. Three months before the attack on Ghouta, a contractor who worked with Limage's office drafted an anonymous challenge that was posted on a website called Innocentive. In the ad, an unnamed "Seeker" asked for solutions for "the demilitarisation, destruction, or neutralisation of a hypothetical stockpile of chemical warfare agents".

The stockpile was 1,500 metric tons, the size the US government suspected Assad had in his possession. Anyone was welcome to submit a proposal, and the ad promised a \$50,000 reward to the person able to demonstrate the kind of "orthogonal thinking that might help resolve and fill this important technology gap."

From Limage's position in the lowest, least-classified area of DTRA, she was aware that a team of military planners had

been gaming out hypothetical responses to the Syria problem for months. "They were doing the exact same thing, but in much more detail, working with the chemists at Edgewood [Chemical Biological Center, the Army's research and development centre] on what they called 'the smart book', with all the technical options," Limage recalls.

The book included everything from conventional destruction – an incinerator or a hydrolysis machine – to "kinetic" options (bombs, essentially) and strategies to quickly render warfare agents unusable in the event of a more surgical military operation. Almost all these scenarios, though, involved either great risk or the possibility of mass casualties. "It was a logistic nightmare," former Air Force Lt. Col. Jannell MacAulay says.

For the past several months, MacAulay had spent every day adding ideas to the list of possibilities. MacAulay had been California Miss T.E.E.N. 1992 (her talent was juggling machetes) before she grew up to fly C-130 transport planes in and out of combat zones. She was 30 weeks pregnant with her second child and had just completed training to become a military strategist when she arrived at Fort Belvoir, promptly went into preterm labour and was put on bed rest for 10 weeks.

When she returned to work in the autumn of 2012, MacAulay was presented with a few options. She could either take over weapons-of-mass-destruction planning or she could lead a new team the agency was putting together on the off chance that the United States might somehow become involved in efforts to destroy Syria's chemical-weapons stockpile.

Her superior, MacAulay recalls, sold the job to her like, "This will be easy. You just had a baby; you'll just do planning. There's nothing going on there." Typically a hard-charging figure, she had completed three assignments back to back, earned two master's degrees in two years, and, after a complicated labour, MacAulay was ready to lean out for a little bit.

The need to stand up a team at all had only been recently identified, when Santee, then deputy director of DTRA, was summoned to a meeting of the Threat Reduction Advisory Council, a brain trust made up of former government officials. The Syrian civil war came up as almost an afterthought towards the end of the meeting, according to Santee, after a long round table on the most pressing threats around the world. The group was familiar

"THERE WAS HESITATION FROM SOME FOLKS, BECAUSE THE NOTION WAS WE WERE GOING TO FAIL, AND WE WERE GONNA FAIL COLOSSALLY. IN GENERAL, THE PEOPLE WILLING TO TAKE THAT RISK AND SEE WHERE THIS WENT WERE ALL WOMEN. THE MEN WERE MORE FAILURE-AVERSE" COL. CINNAMON SAYS



RIGHT: COURTESY OF JANNELL MACAULAY

with the dangers after handling the toxic remnants of Saddam Hussein's defunct chemical-weapons programme, and it harboured concerns similar mistakes might be made again in Syria.

"People really don't understand," Santee says. "We did have to destroy chemical weapons in Iraq, and it was rather ad hoc." There are stories of Iraqi soldiers dumping chemicals and nerve agents into a pool as American troops advanced on their positions. The US soldiers only realised something was wrong when, half a mile away from a bunker, according to Cinnamon, they all developed spontaneous nosebleeds. They were forced to return in hazmat suits and cement mixers to turn the toxic emulsion

into an inert block supposedly still there to this day.

The more they discussed possible scenarios, the more Santee realised with a growing sense of dread that not only was there no plan in place, but also that if anyone was responsible for coming up with one, it was DTRA. When he tasked Cinnamon with putting together a team, MacAulay was one of the first recruits.

Already at the agency when MacAulay arrived was an Army major named Tina Schoenberger. Schoenberger was a nuclear medical science officer with the Louisiana National Guard (the person who would suit up to determine whether a mysterious white powder was or was not anthrax) before the Defense Intelligence Agency drafted her as

part of the team that scoured Iraq looking for weapons of mass destruction. That's where she met her husband, a former Green Beret turned military intelligence officer. (He says he had to get to know her when he saw Schoenberger – who'd grown up riding three-wheelers, playing hearts, and shooting beer cans on camping trips with her big Catholic, Cajun family – had better aim than half of the trained soldiers in their unit.)

Like MacAulay, Schoenberger was a new mum. She'd been getting ready to deploy to Iraq a second time, in 2011, when she learned that not only was she being transferred from the Guard to the Army, but she was also pregnant. So instead of the Middle East, Schoenberger was dispatched to DTRA. "The joke was they sent pregnant women to have babies here because they didn't know what else to do with us," Schoenberger says.

Rounding out the core team was Goldstein. A

former college debater like himself, Goldstein had what Cinnamon saw as an "intellectual fungibility" that would be useful for the task at hand. "She looks really young, so everyone kind of discounts her," he says. After the summit in Geneva, Goldstein tapped Julia Limage to join the team.

From the start, the group sensed it wasn't being taken seriously within the organisation. "The accusation I got from some of the guys was: you just got pretty women to work with you because that made your life more pleasant. Your entry requirement for being on your team was they had to be good-looking women," Cinnamon says. "It was something that they got teased about."

But there were other signs, too. For one thing, MacAulay says, they weren't given a dedicated office space to operate out of, which left them shuttling between Cinnamon's office, Santee's, and the cubicle farm. They did not have a seat at the table in DTRA's daily morning meetings, either. "We would stand in the back of the room," MacAulay remembers.

The nicknames didn't help. "I would get pissed when they would say 'Cinnamon and

"THERE'S A GOOD-OLD-BOYS' CLUB THAT [SAID], 'THESE WOMEN CAME UP WITH THIS IDEA — HOW COULD IT WORK?'"
MACAULAY SAYS



THE PILOT

Air Force Lt. Col. Jannell MacAulay (today and with her family) joined DTRA after being told, "This will be easy. You just had a baby. There's nothing going on there." Then she was tasked with solving an impossible problem

his harem' or whatever...I took that not as making a joke, but of being dismissive," MacAulay says. "I just think that there was a good-old-boys' club that [said], like, 'These women came up with this idea – how could it work?'"

For her part, Goldstein saw things differently. "I never felt that we didn't have opportunities because we were women," she says. It was just 'Who's willing to put in the time? Who can bring their expertise to bear?'"

"They really were not the people that you would have expected to have been part of this team," Santee says. "But in a lot of ways, the people who would have been...they didn't think this really had any chance of success. Part of what makes this group extraordinary is we really didn't know it *couldn't* be done."

THERE ARE TWO kinds of planning in the US military: deliberate planning and crisis action. The latter is what you'd expect:

"There's a crisis right now – how do we solve it?" Deliberate planning is coming up with a million what-if scenarios. The Syria mission started as deliberate planning, or as MacAulay put it, "bullshitting, brainstorming, throw baloney on the table and see what sticks".

For MacAulay, the lack of pressure was, at first, a relief. In the DTRA lactation room, Schoenberger helped bring her up to speed. "We're pumping, and she's teaching me about different aspects of chemical weapons because she was actually a chemical-weapons officer." Quiet and private, the room became a space where they could brainstorm, free from the constant barrage of requests for information waiting at their desks, or the feeling "like we had to hide behind a facade of being an expert".

Anything, at that point, would be better than the ideas that had already been floated, like a large-scale incinerator, or the use of a high-yield explosive that would detonate inside the storage facility, or burning the chemicals in an open pit. (In order to control the plume of noxious gases a fire like that would inevitably create, the firm that pitched that idea

"WE WERE LIKE, 'OH, MY GOD,'" LIMAGE SAYS. "WE ACTUALLY HAVE TO CREATE A CHEMICAL-WEAPONS-DESTRUCTION FACILITY ON A SHIP"



THE CIVILIANS

Chelsea Goldstein (right) and Julia Limage (far right and inset) were both staffers at DTRA when the mission started. "We were the only team in government working on this problem, so giddyap!" Goldstein recalls

suggested creating an "air curtain" of high-pressure flames around the burn pit. It assured officials this strategy had been used effectively before, but balked when asked, "Did you try it out in a situation where if you smell the smoke 20 feet away you would die instantly?")

The team was charged with investigating the viability of ideas like whether the weapons could be loaded onto a plane or a helicopter and flown to a country with an existing destruction facility. As pilots, MacAulay and Cinnamon dismissed the notion out of hand. Even if it weren't for the war, no aircraft commander would agree to carry chemical weapons, stored for who knows how long in containers of questionable integrity, on their plane.

But those early brainstorming sessions did, eventually, lead to a meeting at

Edgewood Chemical Biological Center, where Tim Blades, the Center's director of operations, had an idea for a self-contained machine that could render the component chemicals inert, leaving only relatively harmless byproducts behind. Edgewood's chemists, Joby Warrick writes in his book *Red Line*, had used the technology before "to destroy beer-keg-sized containers of leftover chemical weapons in Iraq". The proposed device was nicknamed "the Margarita Machine," Warwick writes, for its resemblance to the frozen-drink dispenser.

While the process of getting seed funding for such an endeavour would normally take years, in January 2013 the DTRA team wrote up an emergency request – "This was like, 'No shit – we need this tomorrow. We need the money now,'" MacAulay says – and Edgewood got to work on a prototype.



LEFT: COURTESY OF JULIA LIMAGE



RIGHT: COURTESY OF TINA SCHOENBERGER

The best part about Blades' Field Deployable Hydrolysis System was that, unlike conventional chemical-weapons incinerators, it was portable. It could be sent anywhere in the world – a feature that became critical since none of the countries with conventional chemical-weapons facilities appeared open to accepting Syria's. (Cinnamon recalls a frustrating call with a representative from France, who denied the existence of a chemical-weapons facility, while on the other end of the line, the DTRA team was staring at a public website describing the facility and its capabilities.) At one point, officials at the Pentagon were particularly bullish on the prospects of persuading the nation of Albania to accept the weapons.

From the outset, the core team was sceptical that such a deal could be

reached. "I just remember sitting in Gen. Santee's office on the couch after we had a meeting with the Pentagon and thinking, 'We need more options. Because what if that fails, and that fails?'" The Pentagon was putting a lot of their eggs in the Albania basket," MacAulay remembers. "Tina said something, like, 'What about on a ship?'" To three Air Force pilots, an Army major, and a civilian, the idea of destroying the weapons on the open sea may have started as a joke ("This was around the time Lonely Island's 'I'm on a Boat' song came out," Goldstein notes). But, at the same time, it didn't seem insane.

Then August came. The team found out that a suspected chemical attack had been carried out outside Damascus. In an instant, the theoretical work they'd been doing became very real. "As military members,

we would never go to the civilian population first – that's the last line.... [Assad] went there first," Cinnamon says. "That really made the whole team angry."

"THE JOKE WAS THEY SENT PREGNANT WOMEN HERE BECAUSE THEY DIDN'T KNOW WHAT ELSE TO DO WITH US," SCHOENBERGER SAYS



THE SCIENCE OFFICER

Maj. Tina Schoenberger (pictured) and MacAulay brainstormed in a lactation room. "We're pumping, and she's teaching me about chemical weapons because she's a chemical-weapons officer," MacAulay recalls

IN GENEVA, as the team supporting Kerry was hammering out the details, it seemed like Russia had already lost interest in the endeavour. "We give them a piece of paper that says what we think the plan should be, and they just go, 'Yeah, that looks fine to us,'" Cinnamon, who'd flown to Europe to aid negotiations, recalls. "They didn't even look at it. They're like, 'I don't care. You guys are going to fail. Write whatever you want.' We kind of look at each other like, 'Well, if we can write whatever we want, then... let's just go for everything.'"

Back at DTRA headquarters, MacAulay, Schoenberger and Goldstein were working 24-hour shifts. Cinnamon would blast out emails in the middle of

the night: "Can we fly Predator drones in Syrian airspace?" Or "How many months would it take to produce the hydrolysis machine?" They would track the answers down and send them back as the diplomats hammered out a framework. Schoenberger fielded questions about the feasibility of the prospect they'd joked about: rather than bringing the Edgewood chemists' machine into Syria or some third country, what if the demo was performed in international waters?

Privately, Schoenberger was unsure whether the idea would go anywhere. "If you ever do course-of-action development, you always have a throwaway COA that you know isn't really going to cut the mustard," she says.

There were a lot of reasons to dismiss the notion out of hand. A mission like this had never been attempted before. Beyond the practical challenges of outfitting a ship in time, there was, for starters, the potential for a terrorist attack or a devastating chemical spill – either contained to the vessel itself, or worse, affecting indeterminate swathes of the ocean.

But now that it was being seriously considered as a diplomatic option, it

became Schoenberger and Limage's job to run down the particulars. Schoenberger headed to Portsmouth, Virginia, where she met a salt-licked, bushy-moustached man from the Maritime Administration who was surprisingly bullish on the throwaway COA's prospects.

"He said, 'We can do this. We retrofit vessels in 60 days for Marines that are going out on missions. If you give us the specifications, we can do this.'" She can't remember the man's name, but Schoenberger says, "It was that conversation with that guy that convinced me."

In order to pull it off, any ship would need not only a helicopter landing pad, but also enough space to accommodate the chemicals themselves plus two hydrolysis machines, filtration systems, an onboard laboratory, containers for the toxic byproduct that would eventually be disposed of on land, and housing for 35 crew members; beyond that, a 63-person team operating the machines, and a security detail.

Schoenberger and MacAulay started working on a sketch of a white paper. "Before we knew it, we had a fleshed-out ship option," MacAulay recalls. "But no one wanted to look at it."

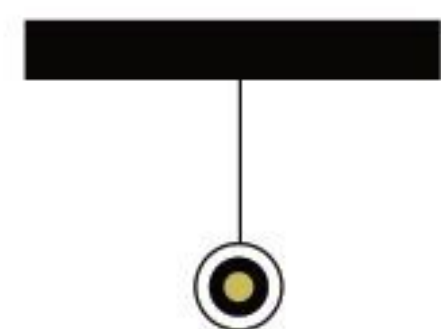
Inside the Pentagon – where suddenly, there was a flurry of interest in being involved in the plan to destroy Syria's chemical weapons – consensus was building behind the idea of hauling the chemicals to Albania. "The ship option," meanwhile, was dismissed out of hand. Santee recalls one official calling the idea "harebrained" at a meeting at the White House and another high-level meeting in which he believes his presentation was deliberately sabotaged. ("I got up to give the brief, and there were supposed to be, like, 15 slides. And after three slides, the brief was over. There were no more slides. Somebody who didn't want me to brief the ship took them out," Santee says.) At one point, he received a direct order to stop pursuing the idea, a command Santee declined.

To Limage, it was Albania that didn't seem viable. One of her first jobs was to complete a comparison of the costs of destroying the weapons on a merchant vessel named the *MV Cape Ray* and incinerators in Albania. Among other reasons that the oceanic idea seemed more viable: no pushback from locals, fewer security concerns, and greater cost-effectiveness. "The ship seems crazier on its face, but we had much more control over it," Limage says.



HIGH-SEA MISSION

The team helped oversee the retrofitting of the *Cape Ray*, adding pumps, hoses, and 2,200-gallon titanium barrels to destroy tons of chemical weapons



After Santee was ordered to stand down, MacAulay and the others took it as a challenge: "We printed out quite a few copies of the ship option, and we were walking around the Pentagon just throwing it on people's desks," including that of the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, where her husband worked beside desk officers for the Middle East. The move seemed to pay off soon after, when negotiations with Albania fell apart. By that time, the white paper had caught the attention of a senior DOD official who helped revive the proposal.

Limage was sitting in her grey cubicle on the autumn afternoon when Goldstein and Cinnamon returned from an interagency meeting. "We're going with the ship,"

Cinnamon said. There was a feeling of triumph – they'd spent months comparing the costs, benefits, risks of each option, and they had a detailed plan ready to implement – but there was also a real sense of angst. "We were like, 'Oh, my God. We actually have to do this now,'" Limage says. "We have to create a chemical-weapons-destruction facility on a ship.' He looked kind of ill."

USUALLY, THE PEOPLE who plan and strategize in advance of a military mission and the operators who execute it are separate teams. But because this assignment cut across so many spheres of influence, because it had to be completed on such a tight timeline, and because, by the end of



it, so many people from so many different federal agencies and intergovernmental organisations wanted to be involved, the core DTRA team ended up doing the work of both the planners and the operators. “We, as the planners, just kept a hold of it the whole time,” MacAulay says.

Long before the weapons could be loaded onto the ship, they’d have to be inspected, re-packed into new containers, ferried from locations scattered across the country through a war zone to the Syrian port at Latakia. On a practical level, that meant sourcing mercury-coated metal drums, forklifts, cranes, shipping containers, and armoured jackets for the flatbed trucks. “We were doing that type of planning on

so many things every day,” Limage says. “Things that one group of people would never be kind of managing in such detail.”

Before the chemicals could be extracted, they would have to be located and accounted for, an exercise that required the cooperation of both the Syrian government and the Russian intermediaries. In November, MacAulay was dispatched to the Hague to help coordinate what, per the Geneva agreement, would be an international joint mission executed under the banner of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) – a group that was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize that December – with support from the United Nations.

MacAulay’s early days in the Netherlands were spent in a room with a Syrian chemical-weapons expert and a translator, compiling a listing of Assad’s chemical weapons since the programme’s inception in the 70s, while a Syrian general paced silently in the background.

“We knew they had this stuff, but we didn’t have all the particulars,” MacAulay says. What quantities of sarin and other chemical precursors existed at which sites? What was the size and status of containers they were stored in? Could they be loaded onto trucks? What MacAulay remembers most about those conversations is that the Syrian expert seemed terrified of the general looming behind him. And he wouldn’t look her in the eye.

In Syria, OPCW weapons inspectors fanned out to sites around the country, while in the Netherlands, US diplomats worked to secure support for the mission from other countries. In the end, 17 nations contributed: Denmark and Norway sent ships to accept the weapons at the Syrian port. Italy offered a port where the weapons could be transferred from those ships to the US merchant vessel outfitted with the hydrolysis machines. Chemical byproducts that couldn’t be destroyed aboard the vessel would be disposed of by Germany, Finland, and the UK.

Back in the US, Limage and Goldstein began compiling a master spreadsheet with each and every item that would be needed and writing white papers about which environmental laws were to be

considered. They met with veterans groups concerned about the potential for chemical exposure and had to prepare arguments for lawyers from the Maritime Administration who believed the mission violated rules against transporting chemical weapons. (They weren’t transporting weapons, the team reasoned, the ship would be a chemical-weapons-destruction facility and there were no rules pertaining to a floating facility of that kind.)

In the meantime, there was still a considerable amount of “squabbling” going on among senior government officials. “It’s a very tight group, but with a lot of disagreements,” Limage says. Once it was decided that the destruction would, in fact, take place on a ship, the State Department wanted one outfitted with an incinerator, rather than the Edgewood chemists’ machines considered for the job.

Limage remembers the matter coming to a head at a meeting inside the State Department. The room was hot, every seat at the conference table was full, and

more folks were lined up along the walls when she slipped into the conference room. “It was a disaster of a meeting,” she remembers. The State Department contractor brought in to pitch the idea was pelted with a stream of pointed questions from DOD officials – some plucked from a document prepared by Goldstein and Limage – while Army chemists had their own set of holes to poke in the proposal.

“It was a lot of people who had in-depth knowledge of the *Cape Ray* option, asking very hard questions to, essentially, one man from some private company who was not equipped to be answering them,” Limage says. “And

there was this poor guy in the middle, trying to control the crowd.”

(That “poor guy”: the deputy assistant secretary for nonproliferation programmes, was a man named Simon Limage. As it turned out, Julia Limage, née Brown, did not slip into the room as discreetly as she imagined. “He claims that he was in the middle of this meeting that was going completely sideways and this beautiful young woman walks

**“THEIR BASIC PREMISE WAS ‘LANDING AN AIRPLANE ON LAND IS HARD ENOUGH. LANDING ON A SHIP IS 10 TIMES HARDER. EVERYTHING ON THE OCEAN IS HARDER, AND YOU HAVEN’T FACTORED THAT IN. THIS IS NEVER GOING TO WORK AND YOU’RE ALL GOING TO DIE’”
SANTEE SAYS**



in and totally distracts him,” she says. The couple later married and started a family.) If there was an upshot, though, it was that by the end of the interrogation, everyone seemed to agree that the merchant ship, the *MV Cape Ray*, was the best available option.

Or nearly everyone. In December, an Office of Naval Intelligence report that issued further warnings against the idea began circulating in the highest echelons of government. “Their basic premise was ‘Landing an airplane on land is hard enough. Landing on a ship is 10 times harder. Everything on the ocean is harder, and you haven’t factored that in. This is never going to work, and you’re all going to die,’” Santee says.

By that point, contractors had been dispatched to Portsmouth in Virginia,

‘MARGARITA MACHINE’

Julia Limage with one of the specially designed mobile hydrolysis systems

where they were working to retrofit the 648-foot *Cape Ray* with pumps, hoses, 2,200-gallon titanium barrels, containers to hold the neutralising agents and the toxic byproduct, hazmat suits, and other accoutrements required for the mission. There was only a matter of weeks in which to do it all before the ship would embark for the Mediterranean.

For three frigid weeks after Christmas 2013, Limage stayed at a dingy Hampton Inn near the shipyard in Virginia, acting as conduit between policymakers in D.C. and contractors rushing to meet their deadlines. The sudden appearance of a perky young lady peppering them with questions perplexed the contractors, chemists, and security personnel. Some “were definitely confused by my existence. I remember the military guys being like,

‘Who’s this little girl on the ship?’ They didn’t know what to make of me.”

She remembers walking into the shipyard that first day, dwarfed by stacks of shipping containers and the pallets she’d requisitioned. “I’d been thinking about shipping containers and forklifts and trucks all day, but it was very much a paperwork drill for me,” she says, “All of a sudden: this is what we’re talking about. I really understood.”

At the same time, pitfalls the team hadn’t anticipated were becoming real, too. There was a polar vortex that year, and as the temperatures dropped in Virginia, PVC pipes on the ship burst, pushing departure further back. The delays prompted questions about how the temperatures aboard the ship would impact the order in which the weapons would be disposed

COURTESY OF JULIA LIMAGE

of. “We were getting towards summer. We weren’t supposed to be destroying in summer. What happens when this stuff gets really hot?” There were similar problems if, for some reason, it happened to be too cold: sulfur mustard has a freezing point of 58 degrees, and if it were frozen, it couldn’t be processed by the hydrolysis machine.

Finally, as the last bolts were put in place and the boat was ready to embark, there was one last query. Like the others, it appeared in the form of an email on Limage’s worn, government-issue BlackBerry: *Julia, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs would like to know who is going to certify the ship?* “I was like, ‘What does that mean? How do you certify?’” Limage recalls.

Someone needed to guarantee that the ship, and all of its unprecedented modifications, was fit for duty. Normally, the relevant division of the armed services would be the one responsible for certifying the vessel, but as in the early days, suddenly no one wanted the responsibility of putting their neck on the line. Ultimately, the buck was passed all the way to the top: Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel himself signed the paperwork, and on 10 January 2014, the boat departed Virginia.

There would be more delays getting the weapons out of Syria, tracking each barrel as it made its way across the country and figuring out a plan to decontaminate the ship once it returned to port, but by July the chemical agents had been loaded aboard the *Cape Ray* and the process of neutralising 600 of the 1,200 metric tons extracted from Syria had begun.

“Once the destruction operation started, Eucom took over and everything went black,” Limage says. “All of a sudden, we didn’t get any information. Our part had basically concluded.” At the same time, there were reports from West Africa of a new emerging threat: a rare hemorrhagic fever that sent patients into multiple-organ failure. A new team at DTRA was being stood up to respond to the Ebola outbreak, and both Goldstein and Limage were pulled onto it.

THE DESTRUCTION OF Syria’s declared stockpile was completed on 18 August 2014, and the *MV Cape Ray* began making its way back to Virginia to be swabbed down and disinfected. But on 19 August, the Assad regime launched a chlorine attack on Daraa. On 20 August, Damascus was hit; villages in the countryside outside the capital on 22 August.

The ongoing attacks were demoralising, Cinnamon says. “You’re heartbroken. You see images you never wanted to see again, after what should’ve been a jubilant celebration: we finally got this stuff taken care of, and we did something that no one said could be done.... ‘Nothing I did really mattered,’ that’s what goes through your mind,” he says, glumly.

Eight days after the 2013 chemical attacks on Ghouta and Moadamiyat al-Sham – the ones that triggered the international response – Ameenah Sawwan was at a wedding. The bride’s grandmother insisted on moving up the date; if she was going to die, she wanted to know that her granddaughter would be taken care of. During the reception, the wedding party could hear a pair of mortar shells exploding in the distance. “I remember we were saying, ‘I hope that nobody was harmed leaving the wedding.’” Later that night, Sawwan learned those mortar shells killed her brother, his wife, and their son. They’d survived the chemical attack, only to be killed by a conventional bomb a week later.

A recent U.N. report identified at least 350,209 individuals killed since the start of the Syrian civil war. The overwhelming majority of those deaths were by conventional means, rather than chemical ones.

The Obama administration didn’t roll out a billowing “Mission Accomplished” banner when the chemical destruction was finished – or mark the success in any meaningful public way. And it’s understandable why they might not have felt comfortable patting themselves on the back: Assad was continuing to attack Syrian civilians. The Islamic State had captured the Syrian city of Raqqa. Russia, the diplomatic partner that brokered the deal, had invaded Ukraine.

“There was this huge buildup of this huge, amazing mission,” Limage recalls. “But then you really couldn’t celebrate or even talk about it because of these horrible things. It was hard.”

In September, one year after she’d been tapped to join the Syria team, Julia Limage returned to Portsmouth for a small, commemorative ceremony. The

ship was empty, quiet, the hydrolysis machines had been dismantled. All that hung in the air was the strong stench of bug spray. “They were using that on people,” she remembers thinking.

By that time, most of the team had scattered. Santee had retired from the Air Force a few months earlier. Cinnamon was rotated out to his next military posting. (He now works in the private sector.) Goldstein returned to the Department of Defense, and Limage moved on to a job at the Department of Homeland Security. (She and Simon recently welcomed their second child together.)

MacAulay and her husband retired from the military. The Air Force had made it hard for the couple to be assigned to the same place. “The system was not built for dual-military families,” she says. Policies were starting to shift, but they “weren’t shifting fast enough,” she says.

Even Schoenberger, who first suggested the ship option, vetted the idea, and tracked down the vessel, didn’t get internal accolades, according to Santee. “One of the last things I had to do was tell her she didn’t get promoted as I’m leaving the Air Force,” Santee says, adding that he wrote a memo telling the folks in charge to “get their heads on straight”. (Schoenberger is still in the military. She can’t discuss the work she does these days, but she has since been promoted – twice.)

A few of the merchant marines, and the Edgewood chemists, and some Obama officials would go on roadshows, giving presentations about the mission, but the four women who were there from the beginning didn’t.

“We didn’t get the flashy

stuff. We weren’t on the news. We weren’t on the boat, getting all the credit and the hero’s welcome when they came home,” MacAulay says. But, she admits, that’s the way these things often go. “Most people only applaud the pilot who dropped the bomb, or the pilot who rescued someone. The maintainers – all of the people that enabled that airplane to get into the air to do what it did – those people never get credit.” ®

“YOU’RE HEARTBROKEN. YOU SEE IMAGES YOU NEVER WANTED TO SEE AGAIN, AFTER WHAT SHOULD HAVE BEEN A JUBILANT CELEBRATION: WE DID SOMETHING THAT NO ONE SAID COULD BE DONE.... ‘NOTHING I DID REALLY MATTERED,’ THAT’S WHAT GOES THROUGH YOUR MIND” COL. CINNAMON SAYS



MAESTRO
Mazzaro is also
a master on
the piano



Sight and sound

From *No Time to Die* to the *Wonder Woman* series, Steve Mazzaro has provided the soundtrack to some of the most spectacular Hollywood blockbusters of recent years

BY MARK SUTHERLAND

JAMES BOND SITS perfectly still as he listens intently to the music boldly blaring from the state-of-the-art speakers. Those implacable chiselled features, the ones that have faced down so many supervillains over the years, decline to betray even a flicker of emotion as the 11-minute suite swells around him, leaving its watching composers decidedly shaken, not stirred.

“He just sat there,” laughs Steve Mazzaro, who composed the *No Time to Die* score alongside the legendary Hans Zimmer, as he recalls the time Daniel Craig popped into the studio to hear their efforts. “Both Hans and I were like, ‘Oh, shit, we’re fired, aren’t we?’ But then Daniel was like, ‘I’m sorry, it’s just so emotional.’ Cue a huge sigh of relief...”

The audience with Craig was just the latest high in Mazzaro’s stellar career. His name may not yet register on the “Bond, James Bond” familiarity scale, but his work will have soundtracked many of your most memorable cinema visits and Netflix sofa sessions. Often collaborating with his mentor, Zimmer, he has worked on everything from *Army of Thieves*, *Dune* and *The Amazing Spider-Man 2* to both *Boss Baby* films, *The Lion King* and *The SpongeBob Movie*. The pair have become the composer equivalent of a new Marvel movie: an absolute sure thing at the box office.

Fittingly, Mazzaro’s own life story could have been pulled straight from a Hollywood writers’ room, although it’s more *La La Land* than one of the superhero blockbusters he’s become known for.

He grew up in smalltown Ohio, learning multiple instruments and obsessed with video games and the music that accompanied them,

SOUNDTRACK

Mazzaro composed a unique piece of music to showcase Bentley's Naim sound system

“Working with Hans [Zimmer] is the best university anybody could ever go to”

especially the *Final Fantasy* series and its Japanese composer Nobuo Uematsu. Aged 13, Mazzaro's parents bought him his first computer and sequencer and he began creating his own scores. As his music became more cinematic, he wrote to musicians and one, TV and video game composer

Bill Brown, became his mentor. His advice? “If you want to do this, you’ve got to be in Los Angeles.”

So, right after he graduated from High School, Mazzaro packed up his car and headed west to make it in Hollywood. He worked as a clerk at a law firm and picked up some video-game and short-film work, but his main income came from recreating film songs for London-based Silva Screen Records. His speciality? Facsimiles of Hans Zimmer's distinctive electronic work.

Once he realised he could do this from anywhere, Mazzaro resolved to move back to Ohio to save money on LA rent. He booked a removal firm and a plane ticket but, two weeks before he was due to leave town, he received a message from Zimmer's assistant asking him to call the great composer.

“My first thought was, ‘Shit! I’m getting sued!’” Mazzaro laughs today, Zoom-calling from his home studio in Sherman Oaks. “I rang him up and he said, ‘I heard that [Tom Hanks movie] *Angels & Demons* track of mine you did... It’s really good!’ Thank God!”

Zimmer offered Mazzaro a job at his Remote Control Productions company, which pioneered the collaborative approach to film composition.

**SPECIAL MISSION**

Mazzaro worked on the soundtrack for *No Time to Die* and *Wonder Woman 1984*

There, he rose through the ranks rapidly, taking on more of a writing role, and now often secures equal billing with the boss on their joint projects: Zimmer credits Mazzaro with being the prime mover on *No Time to Die*.

“Working with Hans is the best university anybody could ever go to,” says Mazzaro. “The biggest thing I’ve learned from him is seeing problems get thrown his way in meetings and being able to watch how he solves them. And that you must always execute Plan B perfectly!”

Zimmer and Mazzaro's Plan A also tends to be pretty decent. Working with Zimmer involves

“always being around the best of the best in all industries” so Mazzaro is rarely fazed by visits from A-list actors and directors (although he does jokingly complain that SpongeBob “never stopped by the studio...”). He toured the world as part of Zimmer’s touring band, playing arenas, stadiums and even Coachella, but insists he has no rock-star aspirations of his own.

“It was awesome, but I think I’m good!” he laughs. “I know if I was in my own band I would not be touring to that extent – I’d be living in a van with three other people. I much prefer being in a dark, windowless room writing music.”

During the pandemic, Mazzaro has seen the inside of plenty of airless studios. The explosion in demand for film and TV content has ensured composers have been busier than ever, but the shift to home screening has ominous implications for media composition. “It’s the best time in the sense that there’s a lot of projects out there that allow you to be creative,” he says. “The problem is, everything has started to go to streaming and, while we all enjoy watching things from home, a lot of them don’t really pay royalties and, if they do, they’re minute compared to what you would get from TV or film.”

This hits composers’ ability to hire other musicians, while the rise of ‘buyout’ deals – where studios pay a one-off fee but retain all the rights – also cuts them out financially from projects that become global hits. “Royalties are what keep you going,” he says. “If Hans took a buyout on *The Lion King*, it would be nothing in comparison to what he’s got from it. Streaming had already started to become more prominent, but the pandemic put the final nail in the coffin. We need to figure something out, because it’s definitely a problem and nobody’s come up with a solution yet.”

Zimmer’s Remote Control operation is among the media production houses criticised for using often-uncredited ‘ghost’ composers but, having come up through the system, Mazzaro says the movie industry’s way of working has forced composers’ hands. “As easy as it is to blame the composers, you can also point at the studios, because they’re helping it by [always] hiring the big names,” he says. “Back in the day, Hollywood used to be open to taking more risks, now that’s much less so. They want big names attached to everything. They don’t care who’s doing the work – they might say they do, but they don’t really.”

Almost as concerning to a sound alchemist like Mazzaro is the move away from cinema, with his stirring, innovative scores designed to be heard on the highest-quality systems. “We spend so much money and time mixing in Dolby Atmos and hiring live orchestras, when, in reality, everybody’s watching it on an iPad,” he says.

It was that quest for sonic perfection that attracted him to working with luxury car brand



STRINGS ATTACHED

Mazzaro played guitar and keyboard as part of Zimmer’s touring band

Bentley, who commissioned him to make a bespoke piece of music to showcase their Naim audio sound system. The resulting cinematic triptych, which encompasses flamenco, orchestrated and EDM sections, features an all-star cast of musicians and will be embedded in every Continental GT and GT Convertible, Flying Spur and Bentayga.

“Nobody can get away from it!” he laughs. “They wanted to demonstrate the audio system in the best way possible and the way to do that is with film music. When you’re watching a film, you instinctively go on this journey that takes you to different places emotionally. They brought a Bentley over to have me listen to it, and it sounds phenomenal.”

It’s among many new projects for Mazzaro, although Hollywood being Hollywood, they

“There’s such a legacy with Bond. Getting the call was amazing and terrifying”

all remain under wraps for now. He’s hoping to move into computer game scores – soundtracking a *Final Fantasy* game remains his ultimate dream – although he admits that, on the movie side, topping Bond will be difficult.

“I can’t think of a better one,” he grins. “You could say *Star Wars*, but that’s just intimidating: I would never want to be up against John Williams! But there’s such a legacy with Bond. Getting the call was amazing and terrifying at the same time. How can we do this in a way that’s going to be incredible, and also won’t piss everybody off? I hope we managed that.”

However, if you expect Mazzaro to talk about a possible return for him and Zimmer to the franchise – currently looking for Daniel Craig’s successor – you will, like all those Bond supervillains, be disappointed. Nor does he harbour thoughts of his own Zimmer-esque movie score superstardom. “I don’t care about that,” he shrugs. “I have no expensive tastes. My wife and I are still gamers – that’s why I like dark, windowless rooms, because my hobbies also involve them! I have no interest in world domination – it’s too much work.”

This, then, is one technological genius holed up in his lair that 007 won’t have to worry about. Instead, Bond – and the rest of the world – will be expecting him to do more great things... **R**

ICONS &

INFLUENCES

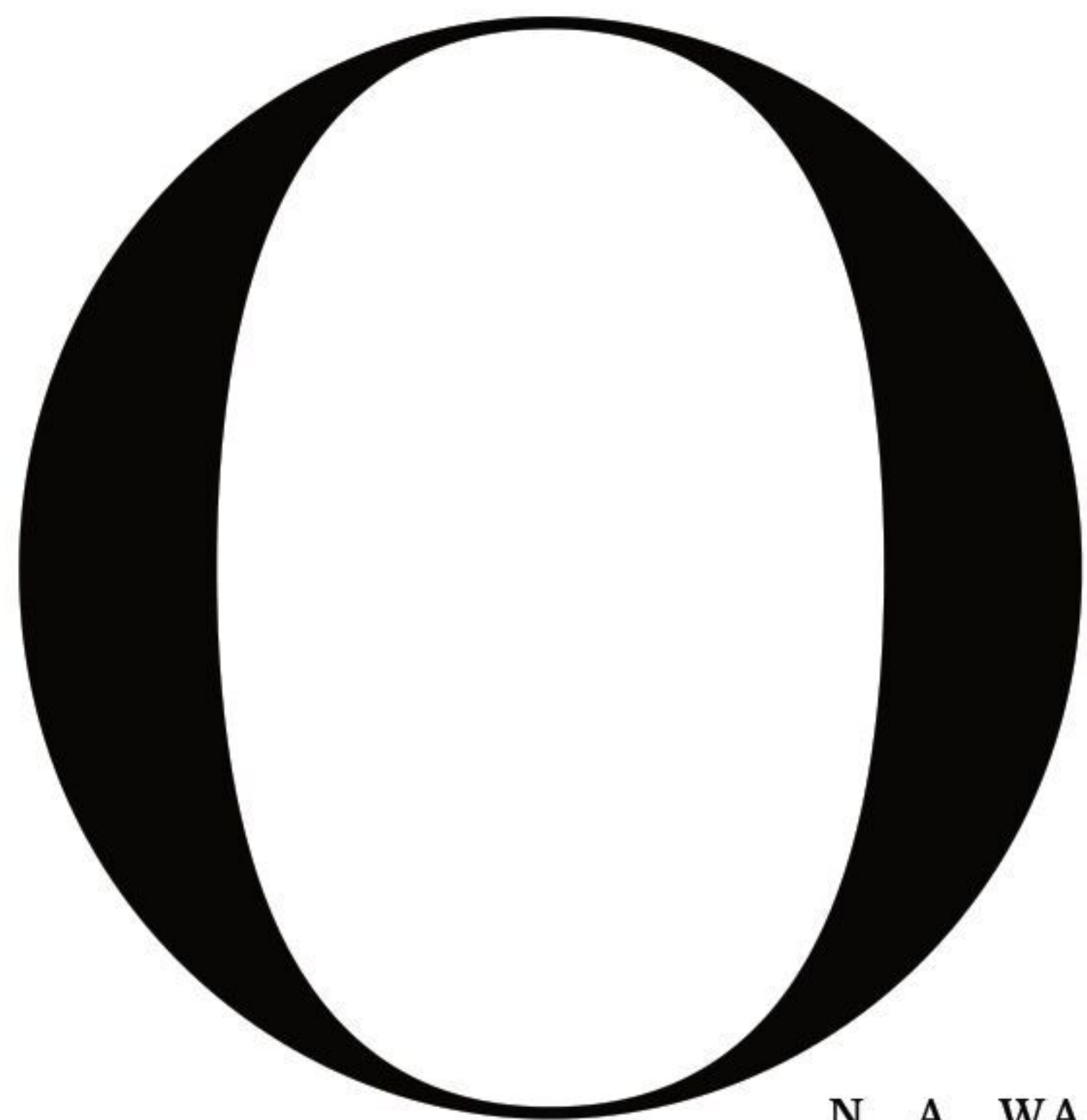
CELEBRATING WOMEN
WHO'VE CHANGED
THE CULTURE

'I Just Said *Fuck It*

▶▶▶▶ How Jennifer Lopez
Broke All the Rules

By Alex Morris PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHRISEAN ROSE





N A WARM

December day in her West Hollywood offices, actress, singer, dancer, producer, mogul, brand, and multi-multimillionaire Jennifer Lopez was trying not to say too much. “I’m trying not to say too much,” she says, verbatim, as she sits on a leather chesterfield wearing a serene expression, a loose ponytail, and a white sweatsuit that exposes several inches of midriff. “I’m really happy. I don’t want to say anything else.”

It wasn’t always thus. For a brief and beautiful moment in time, saying too much was kind of Lopez’s thing. Hearken back to the late 90s, when she was married to some waiter no one had ever heard of and would meet reporters in a bikini top by her Beverly Hills pool and let loose with things like: “This two-bit town isn’t big enough for me.” And: “I was like a rocket, he was like a rock.” And: “I have the ‘stardom’ glow.” And: “The fear of being alone drives my life.” She’d talk about how Oliver Stone smelled of spicy lavender

and how Woody Harrelson flicked his tongue (“very nasty”) and how Madonna should just stay in her lane and stick to singing. Asked about Gwyneth Paltrow, she had this to say: “Tell me what she’s been in? I swear to God I don’t remember.”

So it’s clear that Lopez knows how to dish, that she could dish if she wanted to. And, on a meta level, you’d think she might, considering that the task at hand is to discuss her latest film, *Marry Me*, which she produced and starred in and for which there is a soundtrack that she also developed and performed on, meaning that it is a Lopez project par excellence. The movie concerns a certain Kat Valdez, a global superstar who is moments away from getting married in front of millions of fans when she learns that her fiancé (Maluma, steamy) has been unfaithful. In a panic, she does what approximately zero people would do and instead marries some random guy from the crowd (Owen Wilson, very adept at being “some random guy”). Moderate hilarity ensues, though maybe not as much as you would imagine for a movie that also features Sarah Silverman.

To put a fine point on it: Jennifer Lopez, a global superstar who has (allegedly) been cheated on time and again and who was (possibly) left if not at the altar then adjacent to it by Ben Affleck – who, in a magical twist of fate, she is dating again some 18 years later – is playing a global superstar who blah, blah,

you get it. Art imitates life. You are ready to dig into the emotional resonance.

“There’s a lot about [Kat] that only somebody like me could understand, right?” Lopez concedes. “I had to keep reminding myself: ‘You know what it’s like to be onstage in front of an arena full of people and something embarrassing happens. That’s happened to you. What do you do? What does it feel like when it all falls apart and you go home and you’re on the TV and they’re making fun of you as if it’s not painful? How does that feel? You know what? You’ve cried in a puddle on the floor too. That’s what it feels like. Or going underwater at that point where you feel like you’re drowning, suffocating in your own decisions that you know are not the right ones.’”

You concur that certainly all that feels not great, though perhaps the not-greatness is obscured cinematically by all those beautiful rooms and designer clothes and product placements and impeccable lighting. That’s why it might be nice to talk about these things in a more personal way. For example, those decisions that she knew were not the right ones – would she care to elaborate on those?

She would not. At least not directly. “You start realizing there are no rules,” she says obliquely, feet propped up on the chesterfield and two caramel tendrils of hair falling into her perfect face. “There’s only what you feel is right for you. Because that’s the person

FASHION DIRECTION BY ALEX BADAIA, PRODUCED BY BRITTANY BROOKS, HAIR BY CHRIS APPELTON AT THE WALL GROUP, MAKEUP BY MARY PHILLIPS, NAILS BY TOM BACHIK AT A-FRAME AGENCY, TAILORING BY MIA PARANTO, STYLING BY ROB & MARIEL AT FORWARD ARTISTS, PREVIOUS SPREAD: TOP BY ALEX PERRY, JEWELLERY BY JENNIFER FISHER, THIS SPREAD: BODYSUIT BY HERVE LÉGER, SHOES BY JESSICA RICH, SET DESIGN BY CARLOS LOPEZ AT WINSTON STUDIOS



“What does it feel like when it all falls apart and you go home and you’re on the TV and they’re making fun of you as if it’s not painful?”

you’ve got to live with at the end of the day. Any time I’ve gone against my gut and my instinct, I’ve ended in misery.”

OK, but what is an example of a time you ended in misery?

“So many things. I can give you a small example. Just, like, anything in fear. Anything where you’re like, ‘Oh, maybe I should do this because if I don’t, people won’t see me for a while.’ Then you’re just, ‘I shouldn’t have done that. That was a stupid move. That didn’t turn out well.’”

Is there one specific situation that didn’t turn out well?

“I’m trying to think of something specific.” She pushes back a tangle of hair. She scratches her leg. “It’s so hard.”

What about her relationship with Affleck? Is that finally, belatedly, turning out well?

“I won’t talk about it a lot. We’ve both grown. We’re the same, and we’re different. And that’s what’s nice.”

Nice? Nice?

“Yeah... having a second chance at real love... yeah.” Now the leg is shaking. “Like I said, we learned a lot. We know what’s real, what’s not real. So it’s just – the game has changed. Again, I’m trying not to say too much.”

IN FAIRNESS, there is much that Lopez is willing to discuss, if we rewind a bit. She is happy to share that she was around eight years old when she set her sights on something bigger than the Castle Hill neighbourhood of the Bronx where she grew up, attending Catholic school and watching *Happy Days* and tacking Menudo posters on the light-pink walls of the room she shared with her younger sister, Lynda. “I wanted to accomplish things,” she says. “I had that competitive kind of spirit.”

Her father was a computer-repair technician, her mother a kindergarten

teacher who would come home from church on Sunday and record the Top 40 countdown on cassette tapes. Jennifer, the middle of three girls, would dance in front of the mirror in her room, pretending she was Rita Moreno in *West Side Story*. Her first job was earning \$10 to sweep the hair and clean the sinks of a beauty shop owned by a family friend. Later, at 15, she sold bootleg perfume from “a bootleg kind of perfume store behind the gas station”. As a girl, she dreamed of owning one of those large Barbie styling heads, but when she tried to steal a Barbie from her cousin, she tripped and fell down the stairs. “It was almost like something pushed me down. God was like, ‘Don’t ever take a Barbie from this house.’” She gives credence to things like that, “psychic ability and premonition and things being meant to be.”

As a kid, Lopez was not a special snowflake. She was the daughter of Puerto Rican parents who were hard on her because the world was hard on them. Her mother, Guadalupe, had wanted to be an actress. People told her she looked like Natalie Wood. Then she had three kids in four years and began selling Tupperware for extra cash. She was not a natural nurturer. She was not a hand-holder. She expected her daughters to excel, but also made them aware of their limitations. She would sometimes slap them around. “It was that type of mentality: That’s how you keep kids in line,” says Lopez.

“That’s how they were raised, and that’s how I was raised. Listen, my mom was also a fun mom. My mom was also the mom who got me into musicals and introduced me to all kinds of music. I am an entertainer because of my mom. But I’m also able to survive the things I’ve survived in this business because my mom was tough. I don’t think she could realise what she was preparing me for, but she did.”

Lopez mostly toed the line until she turned 16 and started dating a neighbourhood kid named David Cruz. He took her to prom. They started sleeping together. Lupe worried Jennifer would get herself pregnant, so Lopez took to sneaking out of her second-storey window to meet up with Cruz on the sly. Returning home required stealth use of a ladder. “I was good at sneaking out,” she says. “But when I did get caught, it was bad.”

Not quite as bad, however, as the fight that went down when she informed her parents that she had dropped out of college to devote herself to dance full time. “They definitely had their doubts. I mean, I would, too.

dance troupe – though she hadn’t actually booked her L.A. audition. “[Host and show creator] Keenen [Ivory Wayans] told me he let the girls pick because he felt like I was such an obvious winner,” Lopez says. “The cameras were there. He was like, ‘Let’s have a vote,’ and they all picked this other girl.” Afterwards, Wayans called her. “He said he and Rosie [Perez, the choreographer] were going to make it right. So they let her finish out that season, and then the next year they brought me in.”

Such details go a long way towards explaining the friction Lopez faced after moving to L.A. in 1991. Her first week on the job, one of the girls told her they’d had to postpone a photo shoot because they were waiting for Lopez to lose weight. Plans to turn some of the Fly Girls into a group that would have predated the Spice Girls and Destiny’s Child fizzled out. Bored and adrift in L.A., she started taking acting classes and found out that she had a real knack. In 1996, with videos for Janet Jackson and the New Kids on the Block under her belt, as well as parts

had allegedly had a falling out with another Latina artist and was looking to make a point. He set Lopez up with a room in the St. Regis Hotel and the mandate to get an album done, pulling earworms from lesser-known artists and gifting them to her. It worked. *On the 6* (named after the subway line Lopez would take to get from the Bronx to Manhattan) went triple platinum and sold more than 8 million copies worldwide, to the surprise of many. “She wasn’t on the radar,” says one 90s pop star who ran in the same circles. “But she was a workhorse, single-mindedly hellbent on success. She was going to get there one way or another. I don’t think she had any other intentions than to be a global superstar.”

“She wasn’t very good in the beginning, but she got better,” says Maria Christensen, who wrote and recorded ‘Waiting for Tonight’ with her band 3rd Party and then licensed the song to Lopez. “The engineers thought she was a never-give-up kind of person. They would comp vocals, do a bunch of takes and put them together. She would just work so hard, sing it over and over. She would just go until she couldn’t go any more.”

That worked, too. Lopez’s second album, *J.Lo* (titled after a nickname given to her by late rapper Heavy D), debuted at No. 1 the same week that *The Wedding Planner* was the No. 1 box-office movie in America. No one had ever held those two slots simultaneously before.

So then she made some more movies (31 and counting) and some more albums (nine, with *Marry Me*) and a world tour and a Vegas residency and many appearances as a judge on *American Idol* and several clothing lines and countless brand partnerships and a skin-care line and a set of twin humans and roughly one million perfumes, and despite it all, she still feels like her success has been “slow and steady”. She thinks back to the moment she knew that her life had changed for good, a night in the late 90s that she spent jet-lagged, pacing her London hotel suite and staring at the many pairs of designer shoes lined up against one wall. “I was like, ‘I remember having holes in the bottom of my sneakers,’” she says. “I was just like, ‘Is this happening?’ It was almost like a fucking fairy tale. And it wasn’t about the wealth of it. It was about the change, the disparity in it. That suite was bigger than the house I grew up in. Way bigger.”

By now, she’s no doubt got used to the wealth, but the disparity sticks. “I think I’m an underdog,” she continues. “I always

“Ben and I were together and so in love. It was one of the happiest times of my life. But we were being criticised, and it destroyed our relationship from the inside out”

Listen, if we were growing up in the Bronx right now, and one of my kids came to me and said, ‘This is what I want to do,’ I’d be like, ‘Okaaaay.’ You’d just think to yourself, ‘Oh, really? How are you going to pull that off? You’re going to call a rich Hollywood producer and they’re going to put you in a movie? You’re going to get discovered? Like, get real.’” She laughs out loud at the absurdity of landing where she has. “When you grow up in those neighbourhoods, to dream bigger is only to set yourself up for disappointment.”

Lopez left home for good, hastily throwing some things in a bag and sleeping for a time on the sofa of the Phil Black studio. She lived off small dancing gigs – \$25 here, \$50 there – and dollar pizza and Cup Noodles, treating herself every so often to waffles at a joint called Good Enough to Eat. In 1991, she joined American comedy sketch show *In Living Color* as a Fly Girl, one of their

in a handful of TV shows and a couple of movies, including *Jack*, with Robin Williams, and *Blood and Wine*, with Jack Nicholson, Lopez beat 22,000 other women for the role of Selena Quintanilla in a biopic of the beloved Tejano music star. Her performance earned her a Golden Globe nomination and made her the first Latin actor to earn more than a million dollars for a role. In 1998, she starred in *Out of Sight*, with George Clooney. She was, as she said at the time, edging into “the bottom of the A list of actresses”.

So she did what approximately zero people would do at that particular moment and decided to record an album. One of the musicians who had been in *Selena* – and in the real Selena’s band – gave her a song to use as a demo. The Work Group, a division of Sony with which she’d signed, didn’t pay the demo much mind until it landed on the desk of Sony chairman Tommy Mottola, who



feel like I was scrapping from the bottom. Always. I always felt like I wasn't the one that was supposed to be in the room. That's part of being Puerto Rican and from the Bronx and a woman. You know what I mean? All of that stuff. Not being born into a family with money. Not knowing anybody in the business. I just went out there and said, 'Fuck it. I'm going to just try. I'm going to try to get in here.'"

LOPEZ HAS A HISTORY of doing interviews in one of her many perfect homes, but today she had wanted to meet in her office, which was passed off – without apparent irony – as her true natural habitat, the place where she Gets Amazing Shit Done. The bland corporate hallways give pause, but once you're through the thick, wooden door, the office seems less an office than an immersive experience in extreme luxury. There is a viewing/music room with an acrylic Steinhoven piano, a huge, circular green velvet sofa, and a gas fireplace producing a green flame as if it were combusting legal tender. There is a sleek kitchen with various healthful drinks lined up in the high-end fridge like battalions. There is a mirrored glam room with a pale, herringbone floor and brass accents. There is a Christmas gift from Tom Ford sitting idly on the marble ledge of the unmanned front desk, under the gleaming letters BRX – for "Bronx," of course – and across from a floor-to-ceiling rendering of New York as seen from above. The glass walls that divide the rarefied air are so pristine that at one point earlier in the day, Lynda [J. Lo's sister, who is visiting at the moment] had walked right into one with a thud. "Pay attention, please," said Lopez's longtime manager, Benny Medina, in a tone that may have been joking, though it was hard to tell for sure. He'd been in the middle of explaining how the office is Lopez's vision because she does everything with vision and taste and the type of control that listens to input but maybe only to a point. "She let me pick my desk," says Medina as pop music wafts from no discernible direction or source. Everywhere is the scent of Le Labo Santal 26 and a precipitous view.

Lopez has settled into a sort of listening room towards the back of the office so that she can play the *Marry Me* soundtrack, and soon she is closing her eyes and rocking her shoulders as she sings along to measured songs about love and heartbreak and loss of control. Less than a week before, Affleck had let slip to Howard Stern that he "probably still



would have been drinking” if he had stayed married to Jennifer Garner, and the public had lost its collective mind at the implication that marriage to one of America’s handful of sweethearts might have driven him to regularly “[drink] a bottle of scotch and [fall] asleep on the couch”. Suddenly, access to Lopez had been tamped down. Today’s scene seems designed to display her ironclad control over her brand and her image. The songs are catchy, but the lyrics give little of Lopez away.

Then again, few celebrities have had to deal with the shitty parts of fame to quite the extent that Lopez has – the body-shaming shit, the sexist shit, the racist shit – and the time she spent dating Affleck before probably marked the height of it. “Instead

young to understand at that time what were really the most important things in life.”

Some of those things Lopez will talk about. She talks about going to therapy, and about how she’s “become much more spiritual” since having kids. She says that she prays often and repeats affirmations throughout the day (“I am whole; I am good on my own; I love the universe, the universe loves me”). She says that she woke up this morning at 8 a.m. to a swelling of gratitude in her heart. Her sister had flown in from New York a few days back. Her mom was arriving. Christmas was around the corner, and many beautiful gifts had been bought and many beautiful plans had been made. “I try to always live from a place of gratitude,” she says, completely unironically. “But today, especially, if you ask

“I’m an underdog. I always feel like I was scrapping from the bottom. That’s part of being Puerto Rican and from the Bronx and a woman”

of being celebrated, they criticised. They marginalised. They wouldn’t give it to her, ever,” says her friend and producing partner Elaine Goldsmith-Thomas. “Here was a woman who had the No. 1 movie and the No. 1 album. That had never happened. And they were writing about Puffy. [A year later] *Maid in Manhattan* was No. 1. But here’s what the press said: ‘Ben Affleck sleeps with the help.’ She just didn’t get the credit that other – I don’t know how else to say it – white actresses got. And I know, because I worked with them.”

South Park called her a “mean-spirited bitch” in an episode that poked fun at her Latin heritage. Conan O’Brien said that, as stand-ins for the couple in a sketch, he’d cast “our script intern” as Affleck and “our cleaning lady” as Lopez. “It was brutal,” Lopez says now. “It was brutal. It’s one of those things that you bury very deeply so you can move on and get about your business.” She was able to compartmentalise, until eventually she wasn’t. “It’s funny because Ben and I were together, and we were so in love. It was one of the happiest times of my life. But also, there was this other thing happening where we were being criticised, and it really destroyed our relationship from the inside out, because we were just too

me what my first thought was, it was, ‘Thank you. Thank you, God, for this day. Thank you for my life, what it is.’”

Having expressed that gratitude, she says she slipped on her Gucci slides, padded into the bathroom, slipped off her short set, and turned on the shower, resolved, as always, to be her best self today. “I will always try to be manifesting that in my life, to be doing the best I can and make the world a better place,” she says. Also: “I’m really happy, probably more than I’ve even been in my whole life.” She connects that happiness to Affleck, though she won’t specify what about him makes her happy or what made her less happy before. Or rather, she will specify some of those things, but she asks me to turn my recorder off before she says them – an act that seems calculated to show the calculations she’s making. She talks about reading *You Can Heal Your Life*, which taught her that she could control how she thought about things, even if she couldn’t control the things themselves. She says, “For me, it’s always been very important to figure myself out.”

Part of that process of figuring herself out has involved figuring out how much of herself to share, especially now that her public persona reflects not just on her but on her children. “It’s a real juggling act,” she says. “People can be super judgy. You

know, you let them into your house and then they talk about your fireplace or, you know, ‘Oh, is that real? Did they stage that?’” But it has also involved some soul-searching on her three divorces (to Marc Anthony, most recently) and her two called-off engagements (to Alex Rodriguez, most recently) and the multiple breakups she has had to undergo in the public eye and what it says about her that she hasn’t been able to create the nuclear family she’s always wanted. “When I was in my forties,” she says, “it was like, ‘Well, you’re not really loving yourself. You’re allowing things to happen in your life where you’re overachieving in your work, and your personal life...’” She pauses. “‘Is not...’” She trails off again. “And it fuelled my artistic life, which is great in a lot of ways, because it made me want to overachieve. It made me want to feel better. It made me want to do better and be successful and be better as an artist and grow, and I have. But also, you just want to feel good in your life.”

She looks about the room and then decides to go on about why maybe she didn’t. “It’s not really even your first love that teaches you what love is,” she says. “It’s your mother and your father, what you were taught as a child that life is and love is, through how your parents are with you. Those are the things that you have to go back and work on and examine, when you are having relationships and repeating patterns and going, ‘Oh, what is this happening for?’” Her parents divorced when their children were grown. She doesn’t want to go into too many details, but whatever transpired, she does want it known that she feels she’s moved on. “I don’t begrudge it,” she says later. “I really feel like [my mom] did the best she could. And when I think of it that way, it’s easier to get past the punishments and the spankings and things that happened. I don’t want to raise my kids in that way, but I understand.”

Then again, she’s not sure her parents understand her. “How could they?” she asks. “I think they are confused by my life.” And they are not alone. “When one person becomes famous in a family it causes a lot of discord. It can be complicated for both sides. It got complicated for me, like, ‘Is this still, you know, my family who loves me and accepts me and understands me and feels like I’m the same person, or do they see me as different as well?’ For them, it was like, ‘OK, well, now she’s this, and what does that mean? How much do I expect? How much do I ask for and how much do I not?’ There’s confusion. There’s resentment and

very mixed, complicated, adult feelings. You know, ‘What is all this?’”

THESE ARE ALL heady feelings to try to capture in a musical rom-com, which is probably one of the reasons Lopez felt that *Marry Me* would be a good, safe project for her, one in which she could comment on some parts of her life without having to say too much. The movie is certainly an unexpected follow-up to *Hustlers*, in which her electric performance as stripper-turned-criminal Ramona earned her a Golden Globe nomination and much acclaim. But Lopez says that she had long wanted to do a movie and soundtrack simultaneously (she refers to the *Marry Me* album not as a Lopez album but as a Kat Valdez album), and anyway she still isn’t often considered for gritty, hard-hitting parts.

“There’s a club I just wasn’t a part of. And I always acted like, ‘I’m good. I’m OK.’ But it hurts not to be included. I don’t know if I ever will be”

“I don’t even know half the movies when they come out at the end of the year,” she says. “I have the top agents in the world, but [those projects] don’t come to me.” She founded Nuyorican Productions – which produced both *Hustlers* and *Marry Me* – specifically to “take my career in my own hands”.

In fact, one of the defining features of Lopez’s fame is that, despite the wealth and luxury it has provided, there is still that disconnect – between where Lopez came from and where she is, but also between where she is and where she thinks she could be. One year she was on the cover of 46 magazines. Her music has helped make Latin pop mainstream. But she never won that Golden Globe. Nor was she nominated for an Oscar despite near-universal consensus that she should have been. It wasn’t even that long ago that she was basically broke. This was when her twins, Emme and Max, were toddlers and she was in the process of divorcing Anthony and her label had dropped her and her album sales were lacklustre and she was over 40 and no one would cast her in their movie and she wanted to trade in a car. “And my business manager was like, ‘Nope, you can’t do anything right now,’” she says. “I was like, ‘Really?’ He’s like,

‘Yeah, let’s not make any moves right now. Let’s just wait until you can work again.’”

So Lopez did work. Despite warnings that it would be the nail in the coffin of her career, she took a job on *American Idol*, beaming herself into American homes two nights a week and comporting herself not as a diva who insisted on being surrounded by white lilies and insured her ass (that’s not a thing, for what it’s worth) but rather as a hardworking single mom who got all teary when contestants soared or failed. She launched her first world tour. Nuyorican picked up *Hustlers* to the clamorous admonitions of (male) industry types who thought that the strippers should be made more “likable”. Lopez ignored these comments and spent her last prepandemic year learning how to slay on a stripper pole. She shot *Hustlers* – for which she did not take a salary – in 29 days. When she was asked to

perform at the 2020 Super Bowl with Shakira, protestations erupted that NFL bigwigs thought it took two Latinas to do the job of one white man. Lopez took the job anyway and used her platform to fill the field of Miami’s Hard Rock Stadium with Latino children – including one of her own – singing in glowing, white cages as those NFL bigwigs presumably lost their minds. During the pandemic, she has prepped for and shot not one but two movies, orchestrated a documentary about her life, finished postproduction for *Marry Me*, marched with her children for Black Lives Matter, performed at Biden’s inauguration, broken off her engagement with Rodriguez, rekindled things with Affleck, and spent last autumn in Canada, waking up at 5 a.m. to work out so she could be in hair and makeup by 6:15 so she could be on set for *The Mother* by 7:30. In between shots, she had parented from afar, FaceTiming the twins on the way to school, hosting Zoom dinners, and imploring them to “Brush your teeth! Get in bed!” from more than 1,900 miles away.

In other words, she has worked so hard. She has endeavoured to say only the right things and do only the right things and live in that place of self-love and gratitude. But she still

feels that disconnect. “It’s just 20, 25 years of people going, ‘Well, she’s not that great. She’s pretty and she makes cute music, but it’s not really this and that.’ You know, I think I’ve done some nice work over the years. But there is a club that I just wasn’t a part of. And I always acted like, ‘Yeah, I’m good. I’m fine. I’m OK.’ But it hurts to not be included. I don’t know if I will ever be. There is an inner circle, like, ‘We are the great artists.’ And then there’s the pop artists.” Dreaming big can set you up for disappointment. She’s known that since she was just a girl in the Bronx sneaking out the window to meet her first boyfriend.

Not that long ago, Lopez called David Cruz’s mom. He had passed away from heart disease, and when Lopez heard the news, she realised that she still remembered his home number by heart, so she picked up her phone and dialled it. His mom answered. “I was like, ‘Hi. It’s Jennifer Lopez,’ and she was like, ‘Jennifer...’ I said, ‘I’m so sorry,’ and she started crying. I was like, ‘You know I loved David.’ She was like, ‘I know. He loved you, too. He always loved you.’” She pauses. “You get lucky, you have a first love like that.”

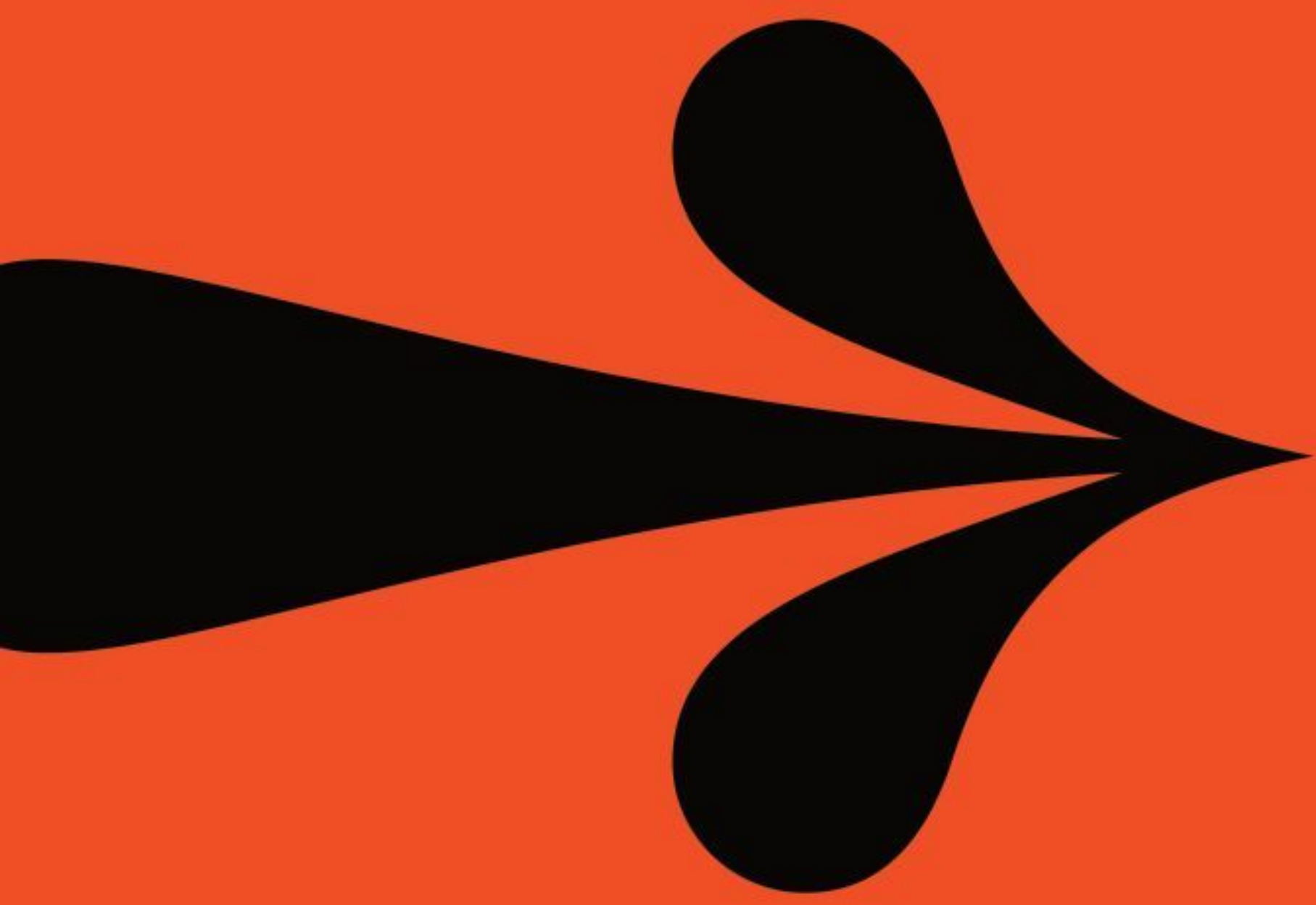
She reaches for her iPad. Cruz had taken her to prom, and she suddenly wants to see the picture. “I’m just trying to look up ‘Jennifer Lopez prom picture,’” she says, mashing her fingers into the screen and slightly furrowing her brow, assuming that the picture – like most of her life – would be available for public consumption. She’s right: a moment later, she holds up a grainy black and white image of her 17-year-old self, smiling broadly in satin and lace. Cruz stands behind her, sweet-faced and grinning. “I made my prom dress. A pink halter, mermaid. Pink satin with lace on top. I drew it and gave it to this dressmaker in the neighbourhood and was like, ‘This is the dress I want to make.’ I had a vision.”

“As opposed to when you used to cut my bangs, which was wrong,” offers Lynda, walking in. Lopez shrugs. Not all visions can be visionary.

Then again, she believes in vision, she believes in fate, she believes that things happen for a reason. She trusts that she will one day get her due. She does not foresee another public breakup with Affleck in her future. “I don’t think we would have got back together if we thought that was where it was headed,” she says. “We feel like what we found again is so much more important, and how we protect that and how we live our lives – what to share, what not to share – is the balance that we have now, the benefit of experience and the wisdom that we gained over the years.”

Beyond that, what more can she say? ®





Gilding the Lily

Since capturing hearts on *Downton Abbey* and making the big time in *Cinderella*, Surrey-born actor **Lily James** has worked hard to avoid typecasting. But few could have predicted her latest role: transforming into 90s sex bomb Pamela Anderson in *Pam & Tommy*

In the run-up to playing Pamela Anderson in the Hulu miniseries *Pam & Tommy*, the London-based actor Lily James had to submit an application to the State Department so she could enter the US for filming. And the bureaucrat on whose desk that application landed took one look at it, squinted, and said... no. •
“I got denied,” James groans. “I wanted to live the lifestyle and get a tan and go to Malibu and try and absorb the American feel. Maybe they were thinking, ‘Well, *you* shouldn’t ►

BY AMY NICHOLSON



play Pamela Anderson – look at you.”

Anderson, it's true, is buxom, pillow-faced, and platinum. James is lean, angular and brunette, though her naturally dark locks startle fans of her series of onscreen blondes: wildling Lady Rose MacClare in *Downton Abbey*, restless waitress Debora in *Baby Driver*, a younger Meryl Streep in *Mamma Mia! Here We Go Again*, and her breakout starring role in *Cinderella* in 2015, which she unexpectedly won after auditioning for one of the wicked stepsisters.

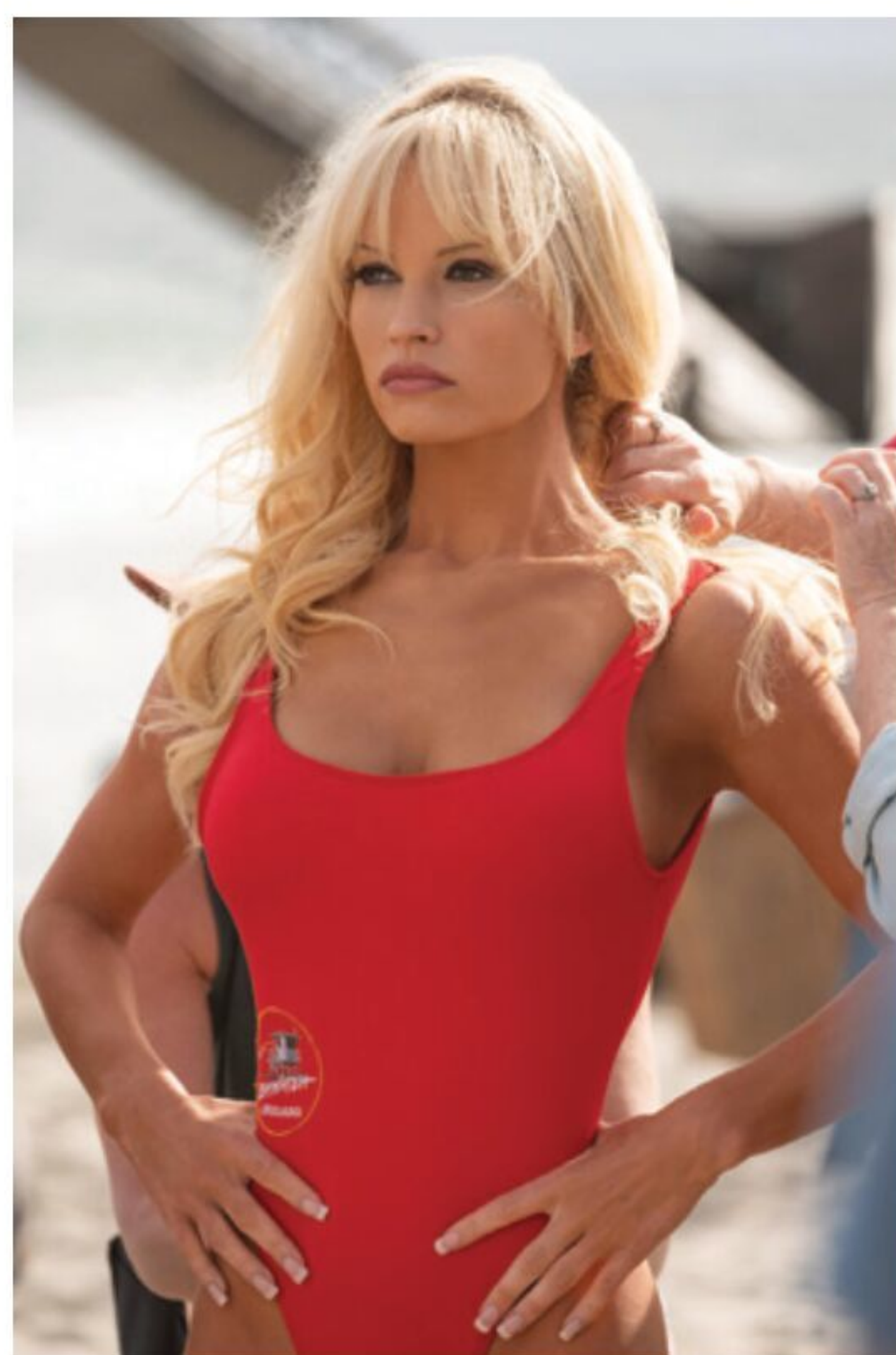
But lucky for her, and us, the US government changed its mind. So here James sits sipping a gin and tonic at the Polo Lounge in Beverly Hills, her pale-lavender nails clashing playfully against her black leather jacket, discussing the show that's launched her career into the stratosphere.

Pam & Tommy tracks the tumultuous first two years of Anderson's marriage to Mötley Crüe drummer Tommy Lee, from their ecstasy-fuelled four-day courtship in Cancún to her public humiliation as their personal sex tape was stolen and then sold online. James delivers a charismatic, funny and poignant portrait, capturing Anderson just as she was hoping to retire her *Baywatch* swimsuit for motherhood and mainstream success. In one standout monologue, Anderson aspires to a career like Jane Fonda – “this badass, sex-bomb, anti-war, workout-video-selling actress chick” – which will never come to pass because of a toxic mix of slut-shaming, scandal-mongering, paparazzi madness, and public mockery.

“A lot of people don't know the true story of what happened,” James, 32, says. “And within that, the bigger themes of privacy and sexism and exploitation into the birth of the internet. It sort of simultaneously collided with this

huge change in the world – the point of no return – and impacted the kind of culture we have today.”

Of course, James' outer Anderson initially got much of the attention. Her physical transformation into the 14-times *Playboy* cover girl took over three hours a day: wigs, blue contacts, teeth, facial



“I FELT THE PRESSURE OF TRYING TO DO JUSTICE TO THIS WOMAN. WHAT HAPPENED TO PAM WAS SO WRONG”

prosthetics, spray tan, fake tattoos, fake birthmarks, and a set of 34DD breasts that were glued and airbrushed to her chest. (“Just incredible,” James says. “You'd never have known the difference.”) When she'd leave her trailer, people looked at her differently. She felt at once desired and invisible beneath the full get-up. It took her six months to build up Anderson's muscle tone and nearly as long to master her accent, a half-Canadian, half-California rasp that was “lower and more mature than I thought it'd be.”

James studied Anderson like she was prepping for an exam, mastering her head toss, widened eyes, and swaying torso. But she also focused on Anderson's

intelligence and sense of humour. James watched all of her interviews, devoured all six of her books, even read her poetry: “*When did I go from a curious little girl, to an insatiable woman? Girl on the run... Femme fatale... devoted and... divided.*”

“I felt the pressure of trying to do justice to this woman,” James says.

JAMES HERSELF is a study in contradictions. The Surrey-born actor reveres larger-than-life characters who live loud and unapologetically, and considers herself a flexible free spirit who races after the romantic. “I'm like water,” James says. “I like to take you on, or I can dribble out on the floor and end up like a puddle.” Yet, her colleagues see a driven, methodical perfectionist – the valedictorian of the backlot – willing to work as hard as it takes to play the kind of fanciful dreamers she claims to be. Her smile is slightly dizzy, as if she just stumbled off a roller coaster. Yet, inside her, you sense a racehorse who, if not pushed enough, might just grab the whip herself. Asked what time period she'd live in given the chance, James immediately says the Second World War, as she'd love the mental clarity of focusing on the fight to survive. Then she realises mid-sentence that it sounds “so sadistic”.

Still, there's a Californian hippy-dippiness in James' DNA that was present even before she arrived in Los Angeles. She sleeps with a black topaz in her hand to lower anxiety, started a dream journal during Covid (in a recent nightmare, she was a toddler serial killer), and dabbles in shamanic healing, where, over Zoom, her instructor connected her to the spirit of her grandmother's dog.

That grandmother was an American actress named Helen Horton, best known today as the voice of Mother in *Alien*. (She's the bitch when Ripley spits “You bitch!”) “I idolised her,” James says. “Amazing bone structure.” They share a jaw line, though James doesn't think hers is as strong. Horton married a Scot and planted the family tree in the UK, where she took over from Vivien Leigh in the London production of *A Streetcar*

Named Desire. Lily's father, a good-looking actor and musician, returned to his mother's roots in L.A. and spent the 70s getting high on Sunset Boulevard – “He was basically Tommy Lee,” James jokes – until a car accident scarred his face.

Growing up, James was fascinated by her father's constant guitar strumming and silly accents and stories of Hollywood, which “felt very mythical”. Yet, she was more obsessed with her mother's books about castle-shaped academies where precocious girls pranked their teachers. At 11, she persuaded her parents to ship her off to a performing-arts boarding school.

She used to dream she'd become a singer like Janis Joplin or Carole King, a folksy type who, in another life, might have passed a doobie to her dad in Topanga Canyon. At the last minute, she decided to study acting at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama in London because she thought it would be an even harder challenge. Not long after she enrolled, her father died. He lives on in her stage name, which reworks his first name into her last. (Her birth name ‘Lily Thomson’ had already been poached by a circus performer.)

After turning heads in *Cinderella*, James made a point of trying to shake off the Disney princess. She told the press that on her way to the film's Berlin Film Festival premiere she had to pull over and pee in a petrol station in her pale-pink Christian Dior gown. Following the glamorous press tour, she went backpacking in Southeast Asia, where she slept in huts that cost two pounds a night. Soon enough, though, she took on a series of roles a serious British starlet is supposed to take, primarily period pieces about plucky girls braving the Blitz (*Darkest Hour*, *The Exception*) with a dash of high-toned theatre (*The Seagull*, *Romeo and Juliet*), buttressed by a couple of bustles (*Pride and Prejudice* and *Zombies* and *War & Peace*). Edgar Wright's *Baby Driver* allowed James to shimmy into the 21st century, but that was a movie about a guy and a car that stuck her girlfriend character in the back seat.

“You come to understand

ERICA PARISE/HULU. PREVIOUS SPREAD AND THIS SPREAD: HAIR STYLED BY DANILLO FOR THE WALL GROUP; MAKEUP BY NINA PARK FOR KAPLANA NYC; STYLED BY REBECCA CORBIN MURRAY FOR THE WALL GROUP. STYLED ON SET BY NATALIE HOSELTON



James as Pam (opposite), and as herself in Los Angeles

PREVIOUS SPREAD: TOP AND TROUSERS BY DION LEE, NECKLACE BY MAGDA BUTRYM; THIS SPREAD: TOP AND SKIRT BY MARCIA

how people think of you,” James says. “That’s very useful, what that fantasy idea of you is.” She saw two options: plant roots as the definitive English rose, or start flashing her thorns. “I was ready for a transformational role, something I didn’t really think I could pull off.”

She created one for herself in the lovelorn Linda Radlett, centre of last year’s terrific BBC miniseries *The Pursuit of Love* (based on Nancy Mitford’s biting witty 1945 coming-of-age novel), which James also produced. Yet, outside of the worlds she created, James found herself in

a similar position to Anderson in 1995: sick of being typecast and eager for her real work to begin. She’d even had a brush with the gossip rags. While she’d carefully kept her five-year relationship with *Doctor Who*’s Matt Smith low-key until the couple split in 2020, a paparazzi photograph published soon after of her appearing to kiss her married *Pursuit* co-star Dominic West brought a whole new kind of scrutiny.

“Women in the public eye at some point experience some sort of difficult situation in that relationship between privacy and your life being in the tabloids,”

James says. “It was a lot. It’s a story as old as time.”

Today, James even seems to empathise with Anderson’s vow to never watch the show. But what does she hope Anderson might see in her performance if she ever hits play? James can’t answer. She doesn’t want to put words in Anderson’s mouth. What’s clear is that she fell deeply into the role. Her co-star Sebastian Stan, who plays Tommy, only remembered halfway through filming that James was English. “Every time she was speaking to me, she was speaking like Pamela,” he says. “It wasn’t until the end of the shoot that I

actually met Lily.” Out of costume at a producer’s birthday party, James went unrecognised by one of the show’s own directors.

“The more I researched, the more personal it felt,” James explains. “What happened to [Pam] was so wrong.

“I lost perspective on who I was,” she says. “I felt pretty burnt out after. It was a really tough shoot.” But in this courtyard, her gin and tonic drained and the night air rustling the palm leaves, she seems recovered enough that she’d gladly do it all again. “What’s the point in doing anything if you get an opportunity like this,” she says, “other than to run with it?” **R**

TRIBUTES

Five of today's top artists on the pioneering women who have shaped their sound, provided an example, and inspired them to break down barriers



by Saweetie

Superstar-in-the-making Saweetie met Cher while doing a campaign for MAC Cosmetics. But the two artists' connection – and Cher's influence on Saweetie – goes much deeper

Cher

What I love about Cher is that she doesn't give a fuck! In a world where people are constantly trying to tell women how to look, what to eat, what to wear, and how smart they can be, what you see with Cher is what you get. The women who raised me have that same demeanour, and it's infectious. My first encounter with Cher was as

a toddler, cleaning with my *lola* ['grandmother' in Filipino]. 'Believe' had just come out and my grandmother, who used to babysit me, would have Cher blasting through the speakers as she swept the floor with her Filipino broom. I would have my little broom, helping her clean. Growing up, I sang 'Believe' at the top of my lungs, and that same Filipino broom was my microphone.

Cher has such an imprint on my brain because she was a major part of my household growing up. In the Filipino culture, karaoke is a big deal, and my family and I would often perform her songs. But aside from her music, I always loved how she managed and embodied her energy. For one, I love a good costume, and Cher's costumes are ones I try to emulate at my shows. The way she could be naked and yet still classy; the fact that she has always been able to exude that duality is majestic to me.

When I finally met her, it was simply amazing. We shared a day together on set for the MAC Cosmetics campaign, and she gave me a lot of wisdom and became a mentor to me. Her energy is so young, and she still looks so good! Regardless of celebrity, when you meet someone, you give them an experience. You know the quote "I may not remember what you said, what you wore, but I remember how you made me feel"? I meet a lot



ALAMY

of people all of the time, but my experience with her was one of the most memorable.

Cher is the queen of costumes and looks, and her overall aura is immaculate, but what stood out the most to me was her honesty. She made me feel welcomed. She and I have a lot of parallels in our careers, especially with people counting us out. People often think

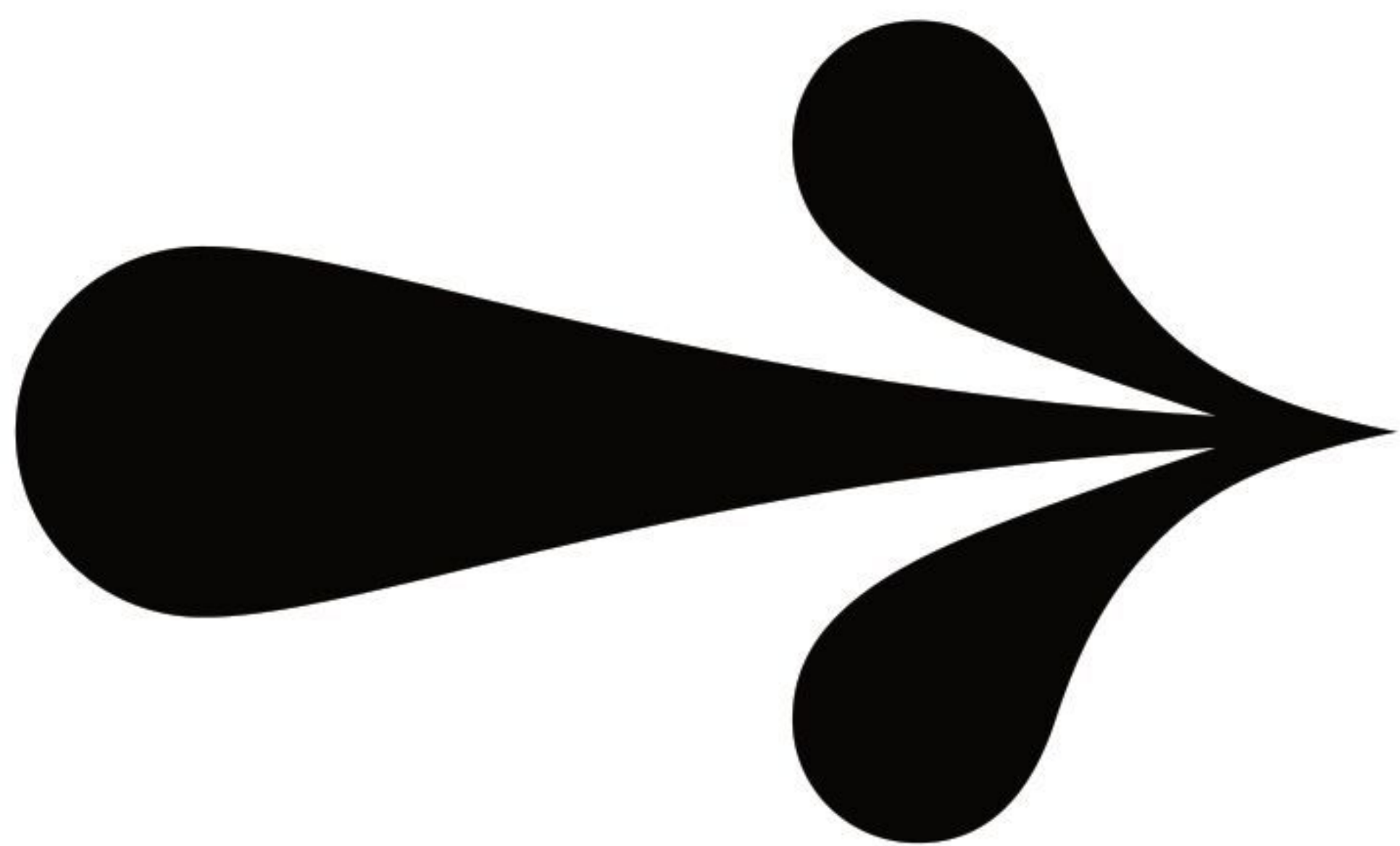
I'm confident, which I am, but there are some days that I do doubt myself. I really want to get into that Cher attitude of "I'm me, take it or leave it." I'm 80 per cent there, but I'm still working on it.

So it was so interesting to hear her, someone who's so iconic, share her battles and personal struggles. To me, she's everything: she's an angel, a queen. But she

said, "Trust me, I went through it too," and that gave me inspiration to keep going despite what critics say about me.

I call her "Mama Cher," but she feels like a big sister, or a close homegirl. We still talk every now and again, and she even had me over for dinner once, which was amazing. Womanhood to me is about strength, knowing ourselves,

and love. It's important for women to fall in love with every aspect of themselves, whether it's physical, mental, or spiritual. To me, Cher is the epitome of that. I have pictures of all of the women who inspire me on the walls throughout my house. I see Cher every morning, and it serves as a reminder to myself that 'girl, you got it.' **AS TOLD TO MEAGAN JORDAN**



Dolly Parton

by Kesha

Pop rebel Kesha worshipped Dolly Parton growing up, and the country queen has been a “guiding light” throughout her career. Eventually, they even got to work together

WHEN I WAS a little kid, my mum came back from the chiropractor and told me, “Oh, I just saw Dolly.” And I said, “What’s Dolly?” And she was like, “Oh, the queen.” And I asked, “What are you talking about? The Queen Dolly?” Then, a couple of years later, my mum told me she had written a song that Dolly Parton had recorded called ‘Old Flames (Can’t Hold a Candle to You)’. I just thought that was the coolest thing in the world. And I still do. Dolly didn’t seem like a real human to me. It was almost like when you talk about unicorns. And I remember as a little kid, it was like she is fable, like untouchable, unhuman, just badass.

The very first time I ever heard her music was when we were watching *9 to 5*, and that’s when I actually became aware of who she was, what she looked like, how she’s this multifaceted artist of every genre, and so funny.

Before my album *Rainbow*, I thought people thought I was fun, but I sure as hell didn’t think they thought I was talented. And I sure as hell didn’t think I was talented enough to ask the queen to sing a song with me.

When I was approaching *Rainbow*, I said, ‘You know what? If I don’t ask, the answer’s no.’ So I just thought, ‘Fuck it, I’m going to ask Dolly Parton to sing a song with me.’ I wept like a baby when she said she would. I’m getting teary-eyed right now.

It was a real corner turned in my mind once she said she would collaborate with me. I made a rule to not do any music – no matter how successful it could be, no matter how many people would love it – that Dolly Parton wouldn’t fuck with. I don’t ever want to put out any music that Dolly Parton wouldn’t enjoy or listen to, or find some humour in. She’s so much of a guiding light, and she has no idea.

At first, I just thought she was fabulous, hilarious, and obviously very, very talented. And now I realise that it’s so much more than that. Her graciousness, her generosity, and the way that she will answer any question with so much respect – but she does not let people ever get one over on her. I always ask myself, ‘What would Dolly Parton do?’ any time I don’t know what to do or say in an interview. I want the tattoo across my wrist – like, WHAT WOULD DOLLY DO?

AS TOLD TO ALISON WEINFLASH



Erykah Badu

by Syd

Erykah Badu's pioneering neo-soul was one of the earliest influences on Syd when she was growing up in Los Angeles

MY MUM IS a huge Erykah fan. We had surround-sound speakers set up all through the house. She had a 300-disc changer, and she had at least two Erykah CDs in there at a time: *Mama's Gun*, *Baduizm*. It was cool waking up on the weekends to music, and it was often Erykah.

She was another thin, beautiful Black woman who I could kind of see myself in, physically. She was the one that I could say I felt like

I looked the most like. She was always eclectic, and I grew up in eclectic settings. I have a soft voice, and she does, too. She can make it powerful when she wants to, or she can just kind of sit in this chill space, this vibe-y area. I think a lot of people would agree that my voice and my music share a similar energy of Sunday cleaning music, or "Let's light the incense and candles and have some wine" music. It just kind of fits a certain mood.

Baduizm is my go-to. But if we're talking about her best songs, it might be 'Green Eyes'. It might be 'Time's a Wastin'. It might be 'Cleva'. *New Amerykah Part One* was really fire to

me, and 'The Healer' was one of my go-to's for a minute as well. It's rare that you get an artist who is able to reinvent themselves on their own terms and keep it fresh, but also keep it them. She's able to reinvent herself, and it's all still Erykah.

My first time meeting her was at Coachella in 2011. She was at a party that I was DJ'ing. Mind you, there was nobody at this party. This party was completely empty. This is back in the Odd Future days. It was our first Coachella performance, and somebody from XL Recordings, who put out Tyler, the Creator's first album, had thrown a party and Erykah Badu was there. It was easy to see her walk in, because there's nobody there. I played a deep cut – a Sa-Ra song that she was featured on – just so that *she* knew *I* knew. I just wanted her to know that: *I know you on a deeper level.*

She danced over to me! Turned

my volume all the way up! She started dancing by herself. It was amazing. There's a picture of it somewhere. I don't know where it is, but when I find it, I'm going to print it and frame it.

She had me come out and DJ an opening set at a couple of her concerts. One was on New Year's Eve. She gave me \$100 for New Year's – she gave everybody a hundred-dollar bill – and I got to introduce her to my mum and show her who put me on.

I've always admired people who just knew who they were from the jump and never had to question it. I spent a lot of my years questioning and wondering in my mind and searching. It's inspiring to watch someone trust who they are and just roll with it. She makes what she needs to make, when she needs to make it. She's not out here trying to stay relevant, and yet she's done it.

AS TOLD TO BRITTANY SPANOS



Alanis Morissette

by
Alessia Cara.



Pop artist Alessia Cara first listened to Alanis Morissette in middle school – and the uncompromising singer and songwriter's raw honesty has been an inspiration ever since

I FIRST HEARD Alanis in sixth grade. We were doing this school project, and our teacher was teaching us about different themes in writing. He was talking about irony, so obviously, the most classic song about irony is 'Irony', by her, and I remember he played the music video on the Smart Board projector. I remember going home and researching her and finding *Jagged Little Pill* for the first time.

Jagged Little Pill is extremely honest. It feels like you're listening to a diary or something that you almost shouldn't be hearing. I always like when women are unapologetically

honest and raw in their lyrics, so that album was really influential to me as a writer. I tend to be a very shy person, and especially when I was coming into being a songwriter, I held back a lot, just because I was afraid of being too honest or too negative. I always felt like I had to throw a positive spin on my records, especially the first one. Going through a lot of pain and heartbreak in my late teen years and in my early 20s made me realise how important it is to be unfiltered and just get to the bottom of what you're saying. While Alanis wrote a lot about other people, I think she projected her own faults in a way that felt very real. I took a lot from that, and I think I still do now. I always have that in the back of my mind when I'm writing my own songs.

As a pop singer and as a pop girl myself, I think we get sucked into the

idea of note perfection and quality perfection, but I always admired the fact that she wasn't always on pitch. She favoured emotion over perfection. She still has such an amazing voice and great pitch, but sometimes she wasn't afraid to go off or to let her voice crack. All of those little holes, I always felt those were really, really impactful – 10 times more impactful than something that sounded sonically perfect.

I think the industry places a lot of importance on women constantly having to prove themselves: it's a thing that we feel a lot of pressure to do as women. She's a great case study for how you can be yourself and not have to follow the pop-star thing. Honesty has the most longevity over anything. Her music still holds up nowadays, and it's because of that honesty. AS TOLD TO JULYSSA LOPEZ



Missy Elliott

by Flo Milli

Flo Milli has established herself as one of the most exciting new rappers alive – and in her fearlessness and adventurous rhymes, she’s a clear heiress of her hero, Missy Elliott

WHEN I DROPPED my mixtape, [Missy Elliott] was one of the first people to say she loved me and that I was a dope artist. I’m still learning about myself as an artist. I’m trying different things. I’m still studying. She’s definitely one of the people I study.

Missy was a part of my childhood, completely. Being a little girl watching music videos on MTV and BET, she was always there. I like so many of her songs, but I have to say ‘She’s a Bitch’ is my favourite. I love the beat. It makes me want to dance. It gives me a nostalgic feeling, but I feel like if it came out today it would still be just as hot as it was back then. The whole procession of the song is my personality. They’re calling her a bitch, but she don’t care.

I remember ‘Work It’. It was so creative, the way she took a part of the song and rewound it. I don’t

remember too many people doing anything like that. I feel like she started a lot of trends.

Missy was very different from a lot of other female rappers in her time, and she was so supportive [of them]. She still is to this day. I definitely get inspiration from her, even being in the studio just watching her videos.

I see her influence everywhere. When you look at her videos and her aesthetic, she made it cool to just be *her*. She didn’t have to have big titties, a big ass. She was just completely herself, authentically who she is. She always knew what she wanted. That fearlessness and individuality has played a role in how a lot of artists are now. Her videos were so creative and out of this world. Those ideas were spread upon the generation we have now.

I’ve never met her before, but I look forward to meeting her one day. And I would love to collaborate with her. I want Missy to know that her spirit is very needed on this Earth. She’s a legend, an icon. She will never be forgotten. Her music will live on forever. **AS**

TOLD TO BRITTANY SPANOS



STYLE

WORDS AND FASHION
JOSEPH KOCHARIAN

PHOTOGRAPHY
MARK CANT

In Your Element

THOMAS SABO's Rebel at heart collection's latest line for Spring/Summer 2022 takes its cue from the natural world. Earth, water, wind and fire are at the forefront of the new Elements of Nature line, while turquoise and tiger's eye stones make invigorating additions. thomassabo.com

HUNTER WEARS SHIRT BY FARAH X BIANCA SAUNDERS. (LEFT TO RIGHT): IMITATION TURQUOISE SIGNET RING, FROM £179, SILVER ELEMENTS OF NATURE RING, FROM £198, CLASSIC RING, £79, FAITH LOVE AND HOPE NECKLACE, £139, BRACELET (ABOVE), £239, BRACELET (BELOW), £129, ALL BY THOMAS SABO



HUNTER WEARS SHIRT BY LEVI'S, BUCKET HAT BY LACOSTE, LEFT HAND (TOP TO BOTTOM): BROWN ETHNO SKULLS RING, £259, TIGER'S EYE & ENGRAVINGS RING, FROM £179, CLASSIC RING, £79, CROSS BRACELET, £149, TWO-TONE LUCKY CHARM BRACELET, £149, GREY BRAIDED NAPPA LEATHER BRACELET, £69, ALL BY THOMAS SABO; RIGHT HAND: INLAY SIGNET RING, FROM £179, TIGER'S EYE RING FROM £179, ELEMENTS OF NATURE NECKLACE, £179, ALL BY THOMAS SABO



HUNTER WEARS TOP BY 120% LINO AT MR PORTER
TOP HAND (TOP TO BOTTOM)
TURQUOISE CLASSIC RING, £139, ENGRAVED SIGNET RING, £179, TURQUOISE RING, £179, GREEN CROSS BRACELET, £149, TWO-TONE LUCKY CHARM BRACELET, £149, ALL BY THOMAS SABO

LOWER HAND:
HUNTER WEARS TURQUOISE SIGNET RING, £179, CROSS RING, FROM £149, CLASSIC RING, £79, TIGER'S EYE LUCKY CHARM BRACELET, £139, ALL BY THOMAS SABO

MODEL: HUNTER WARR AT SUPA MODEL MANAGEMENT, GROOMING BY KIERA O'BRIEN AT GARY REPRESENTS

HUNTER WEARS TOP BY CDLP,
RINGS (TOP TO BOTTOM):
CLASSIC RING £79, SILVER AND
ONYX INLAY RING, FROM £179,
TIGER'S EYE INLAY SIGNET
RING, FROM £179, ELEMENTS
OF NATURE NECKLACE, £179,
BRACELET (RIGHT), £239,
BRACELET (LEFT) £129, ALL BY
THOMAS SABO



FREEDOM, ENERGY and strength are the pillars of THOMAS SABO's Spring/Summer 2022 Elements of Nature collection. An extension of their popular Rebel at heart line, it has a strong focus on the four elements and their respective zodiac signs.

Compass points, symbols of nature, anchors, the tree of love and motifs such as the burning heart evoke the spirit of travel and adventure, tied in with the mysticism and power of the range's new colourways, the tiger's eye and turquoise. These energy-charged stones each have a special meaning, with the faux-turquoise symbolising luck, hope and tranquillity, while the tiger's eye embodies dynamism, strength and protection.

Both come in amulet-style necklaces, ornamental rings and beaded wrist-wear inspired by lucky bracelets. The pieces, as always, are elaborately hand-crafted from blackened 925 sterling silver and finished with fine attention to detail. By drawing from nature, the jewellery brand has captured the perfect balance of staying grounded while connecting with the world. *Available in stores and thomassabo.com*



Turquoise Compass Pendant,
£198



Faith, Love, Hope Pendant,
£139



Gold Cross Bracelet,
£149



Turquoise Ring,
£179



Gold and Silver Elements of Nature Bracelet,
£598



Tiger's Eye Classic Ring,
£139



Ethno Skulls Ring,
£259



Tree of Love Ring,
£159



Tiger's Eye Dog Tag Pendant,
£279



Silver Elements of Nature Necklace,
£198



Turquoise Disc Leather Strap Bracelet,
£198



Turquoise Lucky Charm Bracelet,
£139



Elements of Nature Ring,
£239



Turquoise Ring,
£179

RS
STYLE
WHAT WE WANT AND
WHAT WE NEED
 WORDS AND EDIT
 JOSEPH KOCHARIAN

Life's a breeze

Springing into action for 2022, Tommy Jeans have introduced a Chicago reversible windbreaker that can be worn two ways (very Marge Simpson and her iconic Chanel ensemble). Made from 100 per cent recycled nylon, and coming in an array of colourways complete with the perennially popular Tommy Jeans flag motif, this piece will be your go-to cover-up.
tommy.com



Walking on air

Simply by its name, the 'Cloudmonster', we knew On's latest shoe creation was going to be an instant classic. Thanks to CloudTec technology, the Swiss brand's trainers are so light that wearing them is like walking on air, but the Cloudmonster has extra cushioning for a super-soft landing when you're out pounding the pavements. As well as being uber-comfy, the chunky style is giving us fashion trainer, sneaker-head vibes, which we're absolutely here for. The Cloudmonster is available from 31 March online and from selected retail partners.
on-running.com

Joy to the world

Full of the joys of spring, Colmar Originals have launched their New Optimistic World collection, evoking lightness and freedom. Innovation is key for the brand this season, with eco-friendly fabrics and functionality being paired with Colmar's cool aesthetic. Their short jackets with tone-on-tone edges are now made with recycled yarn, through an energy-saving manufacturing process that slashes the amount of pollutants released into the earth. New additions to the line include three water-repellent, treated jackets (with and without hoods), as well as super-soft jacquard sweatshirts and slim-fit gilets – all with Colmar's signature, brightly coloured palette to lift your spirits.
colmar.it





In stitches

If it ain't broke, it still might need a little fixing, and that's exactly what AllSaints are doing with their Remodelled collection. Made from fabrics and offcuts from old production runs, each shirt from the capsule range is made of patchwork to create a unique, limited-edition piece. They're on sale in London's Regent Street and New York's Soho Broadway branches, as well as online, while stocks last.

allsaints.com



Earth calling

"Only when we embrace our connection to nature and our innermost instincts can we reach the apex of our potential," says Roja Dove, the genius nose behind Roja Parfums. This is the ethos behind the brand's latest fragrance, Apex. Inhale its top notes of bergamot, lemon and mandarin, before the heart notes of pineapple, jasmine and cistus kick in. Patchouli and fir balsam notes then come to the fore, before it finishes with the sensual scents of sandalwood and frankincense. Apex is a blend of brightness and warmth, a celebration of the natural world. Breathe it in.

rojaparfums.com

Bags of style

The Nosakhari team have one common goal: to celebrate individuality and self-expression by crafting luxury leather accessories that stand out. Expertly made by a dedicated band of creatives, the selection of bold leather goods includes bags, briefcases, folios, small accrues and cross-body bags in a chic yet bold colour palette that feels both contemporary and classic – just what you want in a statement bag.

nosakhari.com



The sisterhood

The Haim sisters are fronting Coach's latest campaign, photographed by Juergen Teller. The American pop-rock band are wearing signature denim ready-to-wear pieces and boots and accessorising with Coach icons including the Rogue, Tabby and Field tote bags. Teller has shot the band in cultural hubs NYC and Shanghai, showcasing the brand's fun and playful aesthetic.

uk.coach.com



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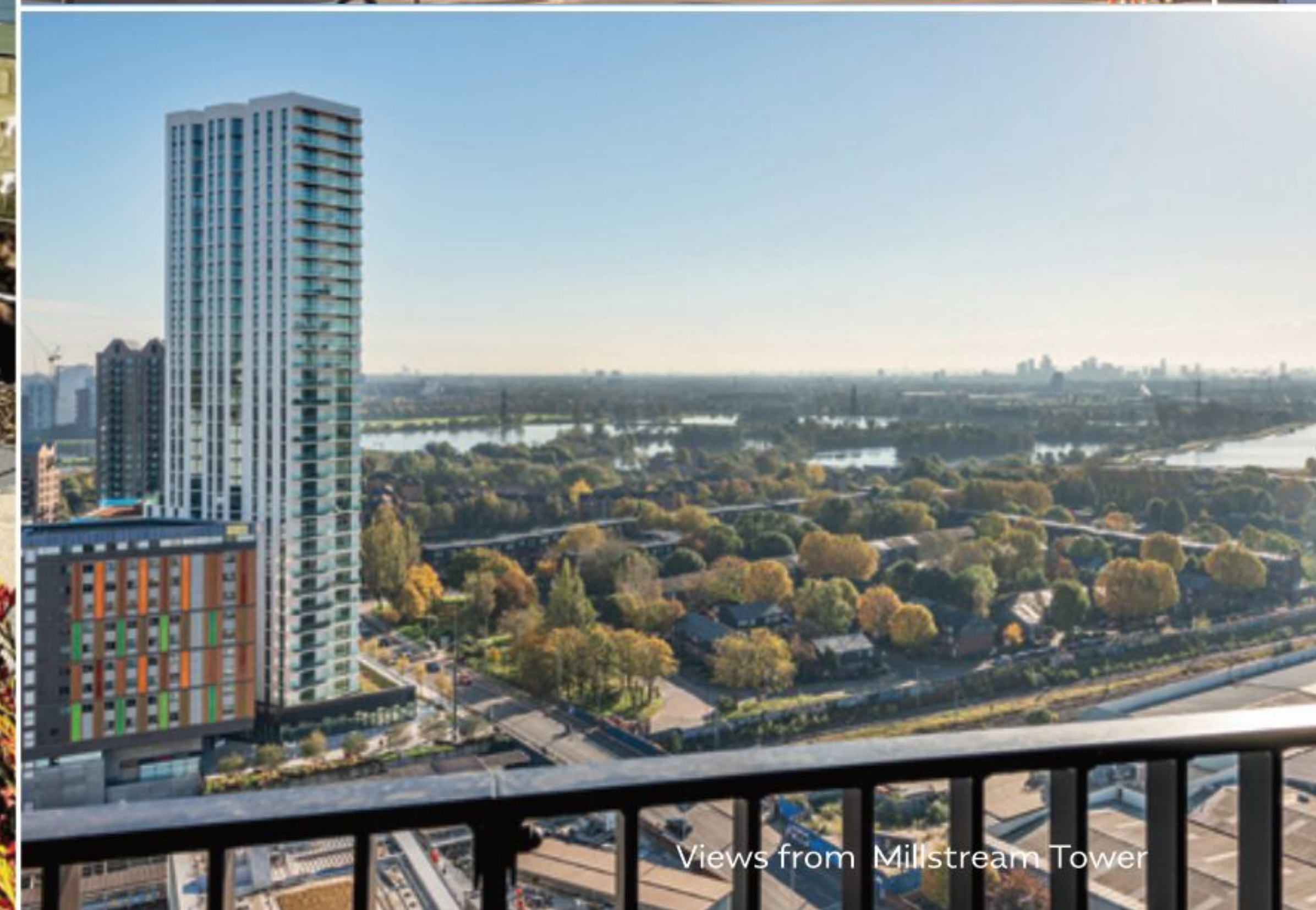
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Reviews

Music

ALL CHANGE

*Aiming for pop
supremacy,
Charli XCX's
latest album lays
it on the line*



Charli XCX

CRASH

Atlantic



IN EARLY FEBRUARY, Charli XCX appeared to throw her hands in the air, and not in a pop-euphoria kind of way. With her fifth studio album drawing ever closer, the artist had made it clear that this would be her biggest bid for pop superstardom yet, but this idea didn't sit wholly comfortably with her fanbase, a community who perhaps worried what might happen when their underdog hero underwent a mainstream makeover.

Given the proverbial inch on the collaborative creative process of 2020's lockdown record *how i'm feeling now*, some listeners appeared to be taking ➔

ILLUSTRATION BY
Jodie Foster



the mile, and XCX was frustrated, unable to do right for doing wrong.

“I’ve always had a pretty open dialogue with you guys... [but] I’ve noticed lately that a few people seem quite angry at me”, she wrote on Twitter. “For the choices of songs I’ve chosen to release, for the way I’ve decided to roll out my campaign, for the things I need to do to fund what will be the greatest tour I’ve ever done... I just wanted to get on here and say hey, I’m really out here trying my best and working my ass off”.

Audience over-entitlement is nothing new, but XCX’s frank admission helps to set the tone for *CRASH* as something a little more than an album; it’s an intentional career benchmark that asks its audience to place full faith back in the person who is actually driving the car.

It’s an ask that indisputably pays off. The title track opener feels like it lives in the same sonic universe as 2014’s ‘Doing It’ with Rita Ora, a slumber party bop with an infectiously staccato chorus. ‘Good Ones’ is an all-time goodie, as is ‘Beg for You’, a bouncy, future-forward interpolation of Petra Marklund’s dance classic ‘Cry for You’ that offers up plenty of room for guest star Rina Sawayama to shine.

The singles are unmistakably gems, but they pave the way for some seriously credible noughties cubic zirconia; ‘Constant Repeat’ lives up to its title with enough glitchy, crunchy bits to keep old fans happy, while ‘Yuck’ humorously explores the cringe moment that comes when a boy insists on “sending me flowers when I’m just trying to get lucky”, the sort of cool-girl California melody that would have Katy Perry or Doja Cat clenching their teeth in envy. Floor-filler ‘Used to Know Me’, floating somewhere between ‘Show Me Love’ and ‘Destination Calabria’, is a *RuPaul’s Drag Race* lipsync in waiting, near impossible to hear without breaking into a spontaneous vogue.

‘Lightning’, ‘Move Me’ and ‘Every Rule’ aren’t perhaps as immediate, but they don’t upset the apple cart either, adhering to the record’s overarching soundscape of drum machines and underwater vocals.

CRASH may not be the 12-for-12 game-changer that will thrill every fan in equal measure, but if this is what Charli XCX sounds like when she’s gunning for global superstar, very few could argue that she’s not deeply deserving of the crown. **JENESSA WILLIAMS**

FONTAINES’ HOMECOMING

The Dublin band’s third album is borne of uncertainty and disconnection but ends up fantastically fearless

IN 2019, DUBLIN’S Fontaines D.C. stumbled into becoming the hottest guitar band on the planet with debut album *Dogrel*, and every note they’ve written since has been a reaction to this whiplash-like change in circumstances.

After 2020’s *A Hero’s Death* saw them reflecting on fame from the road,



Fontaines D.C.

Skinty Fia

Partisan Records

★★★★★

It’s on the album’s second half, though, that *Skinty Fia* reaches its brilliant peaks. Striking highlight ‘The Couple Across the Way’ sees Chatten’s voice set over just an accordion, as he strikingly sings of how “*the world has changed beyond our doorstep*”.

The album’s revelation of a title track is the boldest step forward here, though, a song on which Chatten develops a more rhythmic, rap-adjacent cadence to his voice over danceable, metallic instrumentation.

Single ‘I Love You’, meanwhile, is closer to the Fontaines formula we know, but works on tweaking and perfecting it as Chatten launches into a captivating monologue at its apex. He sounds utterly possessed as he discusses how he wrote the song so he can “*be here lovin’ you when I’m in the tomb*”.

The track provides a rare statement of certainty on an album that largely poses questions rather than provides answers. Searching for clarity in its lyrics while pushing fantastically forwards in its music, this is Fontaines D.C.’s best album yet.

WILL RICHARDS



album three is about observing Irishness from afar after the whole band moved away from their homeland in recent years. Its hazy instrumentation translates this distance perfectly, as if peering at their old selves through misted glass.

Skinty Fia features both the band’s most stark,

emotionally open music yet, as well as their most opaque. ‘Big Shot’ is cloaked in reverb and defined by Chatten’s morose vocals, while ‘Bloomsday’ is similarly murky, with stabs of guitar poking through its clouded atmosphere. Even on the catchy single ‘Jackie Down the Line’, a feeling of melancholia still permeates.

Laughing all the way to the top

IT WAS EASY TO BE CYNICAL about the hype of Wet Leg’s debut 2021 single ‘Chaise Lounge’. Here was an unknown band that struck gold with an inane, spoken-word indie rock song about sitting on a sofa. But follow-up singles ‘Wet Dream’ and ‘Too Late Now’ buried any initial scepticism. Wry humour remained intact, though now we got to hear Rhian Teasdale and Hester Chambers’ mellifluous singing and meatier melodics.

Pleasingly, their debut album has other strong tracks that traverse 60s pop, C86 jangle and shoegaze. ‘Angelica’ is the highlight: a woozy ditty about taking drugs at a party you “want to run away” from. Harmonies drape over chiming guitars that melt suitably into My Bloody Valentine-style riffs as lyrical surrealism unfolds. Elsewhere, deadpan and earnestness vie, such as on heartbreak anthem ‘Loving You’. Heartbreak is a fixture (‘Ur Mum’, ‘Piece of Shit’), proving that Wet Leg go deeper than silliness. In maddening modern life, such contrasts between escapism and realism is a tonic. **CHARLOTTE KROL**



Wet Leg

Wet Leg

★★★★☆



Quick Hits

Six new albums you need to know about now



Everything Everything
Raw Data Feel
AWAL



IS AI THE FUTURE? Even as one of the more experimental groups in British indie-rock, using AI software to produce lyrics for a concept album seems a stretch for Everything Everything. But this band have nevertheless injected human warmth into this captivating record which blends futuristic disco-pop, electronic soul and atmospheric rock.



Let's Eat Grandma
Two Ribbons
Transgressive



THE TIES THAT BIND Jenny Hollingworth and Rosa Walton established themselves as one of the UK's most imaginative bands with the forward-thinking synth-pop of 2018's *I'm All Ears*. Here, they hone their sound on an album that explores themes of loss, friendship and adulthood, as the pair's songwriting reaches new emotional depths. Spellbinding.



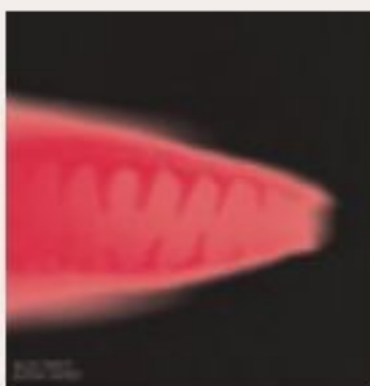
Father John Misty
Chloë and the Next 20th Century
Bella Union



PROVOCATEUR If there's been a flaw in the triumphant tale of Josh Tillman going from ex-Fleet Foxes drummer to successful singer-songwriter, it's that sometimes he's just a bit much. He gets the balance right here, though, keeping his smart-arse side in check and letting his smoky croon melt into the background, behind strings and woozy brass.



Bloc Party
Alpha Games
Infectious / BMG



GET THE PARTY STARTED Bloc Party was one of a cluster of bands who reshaped British guitar music in the mid-00s with wiry guitar lines, smart lyrics, intricate rhythms and surging grooves. They've never quite lived up to that early promise, and here they sound like a regular rock band. Good in parts, but where did all the grand ideas go?



Placebo
Never Let Me Go
Republic of Music



HOLD TIGHT The idea of Placebo still going strong after 25 years may have seemed unlikely at the start. Their chaotic whirlwind of debauched behaviour and hedonistic alt-rock anthems had all the hallmarks of a crash and burn, but they are growing old gracefully, with the rock riffs a little more controlled and Molko's nasal hooks given room to breathe.



Sea Girls
Homesick
Polydor



TIDE IS HIGH Sea Girls are the latest British guitar band to go under the radar — until they sell out Alexandra Palace. Call it the Courteeners route to success: bypass critical acclaim and let diehard fans do the heavy lifting. This second record is purpose-built for live shows with its holler-along indie anthems. Solid enough, but onstage is where it'll come to life.



Blossoms
Ribbon Around the Bomb
Blood Records
★★★★☆

BLOOMING WONDER

IM WIDE awake, *Empire State of shock through my body, You can stay on Blecker Street, Midtown and on Broadway,*” comes the initial croon of Blossoms frontman Tom Ogden on ‘Ode To NYC’ from their new album *Ribbon Around the Bomb*.

As that title and lyrics suggest, Blossoms are at their most introspective here, stripping back the synths and ABBA-esque pop hooks for a record that takes stock of how their journey in music so far has taken them across the globe.

With three No. 1 albums under their belt so far, this fourth record shows off a deserved confidence in their sound. The pop hooks remain as catchy as ever, but a newfound sonic influence from the likes of Harry Nilsson and Paul Simon is also littered throughout.

For the most part, this subtle variation to their sound fits the band well. Long-term fans can rest easy in knowing that their familiar formula is present and correct, but they have shaken it up just enough to welcome a whole new group of fans as a new era beckons. **NICK REILLY**



Big losers:
Neumann
(Jared Leto)
and wife
Rebekah (Anne
Hathaway)

TV

HOW TO LOSE A FORTUNE

The story of WeWork founder Adam Neumann and his spectacular \$40-billion fall from grace

WHAT is it like to lose more than \$40 billion dollars? Only a very few people are able to answer this question. One of them is Adam Neumann, the ousted CEO and founder of WeWork.

You may have seen the company in endless city locations. WeWork offers co-working spaces for companies and freelancers who have had enough

of working at home or in cafés, but it was also marketed heavily as a lifestyle opportunity.

“If you’re looking for an office to punch in and out of, this isn’t for you,” says Neumann (Jared Leto) to a potential new customer in this new AppleTV+ series, inspired by real events. “I want you to meet your wife here. I want you to find a new business partner over a game of beer pong and get

so wasted you don’t show up until the next day till noon!”

After attracting billions of dollars worth of expansion and opening offices in more than 500 locations, WeWork was then lined up for a stock exchange debut. Its IPO had a valuation of \$47 billion. Then, it all unravelled. Newspaper articles exposed substantial losses and no easy way to seek profitability, as well

as scrutiny of Neumann’s own conduct. Employees also came forward with allegations of workplace sexual harassment, the result of a fratboy corporate atmosphere. The IPO was subsequently withdrawn, the company’s valuation dropped by \$40 billion and Neumann was forced to resign.

What happened? This engrossing series charts how it all came crashing down.

The story is rich in detail, thanks to the involvement of Lee Eisenberg and Drew Crevello as co-writers and co-showrunners, who are both also behind the hit *Wondery* podcast exploring the company.

Usually, a television series set in the business world can get sucked out by endless suits or corporate-speak, or a heavy-handed focus on company financials that drags you back – screaming – to GCSE Maths. Thankfully, *WeCrashed* doesn’t fall into the trap – partially because WeWork was far from a typical business, but also because of this show’s laser-like focus on the personalities and

WeCrashed

STARRING Jared Leto, Anne Hathaway

NETWORK AppleTV+

AIR DATE Out now

★★★★☆

behaviours of Adam Neumann and his wife Rebekah (Anne Hathaway), who also served as the company's chief brand officer. Brash, egotistical and with an inability not to take everything personally, Neumann was able to win people over because of his self-confidence, his passionate storytelling and his knack for letting people hear the things they wanted to – as they forgot about any concerns they were going to raise.

WeCrashed is a cautionary tale about individuals being given near god-like status in the industry for touting how their business or idea is going to completely revolutionise the future, without their company having yet made a penny of profit, because of the industry's obsession with individuals who have made it work before them.

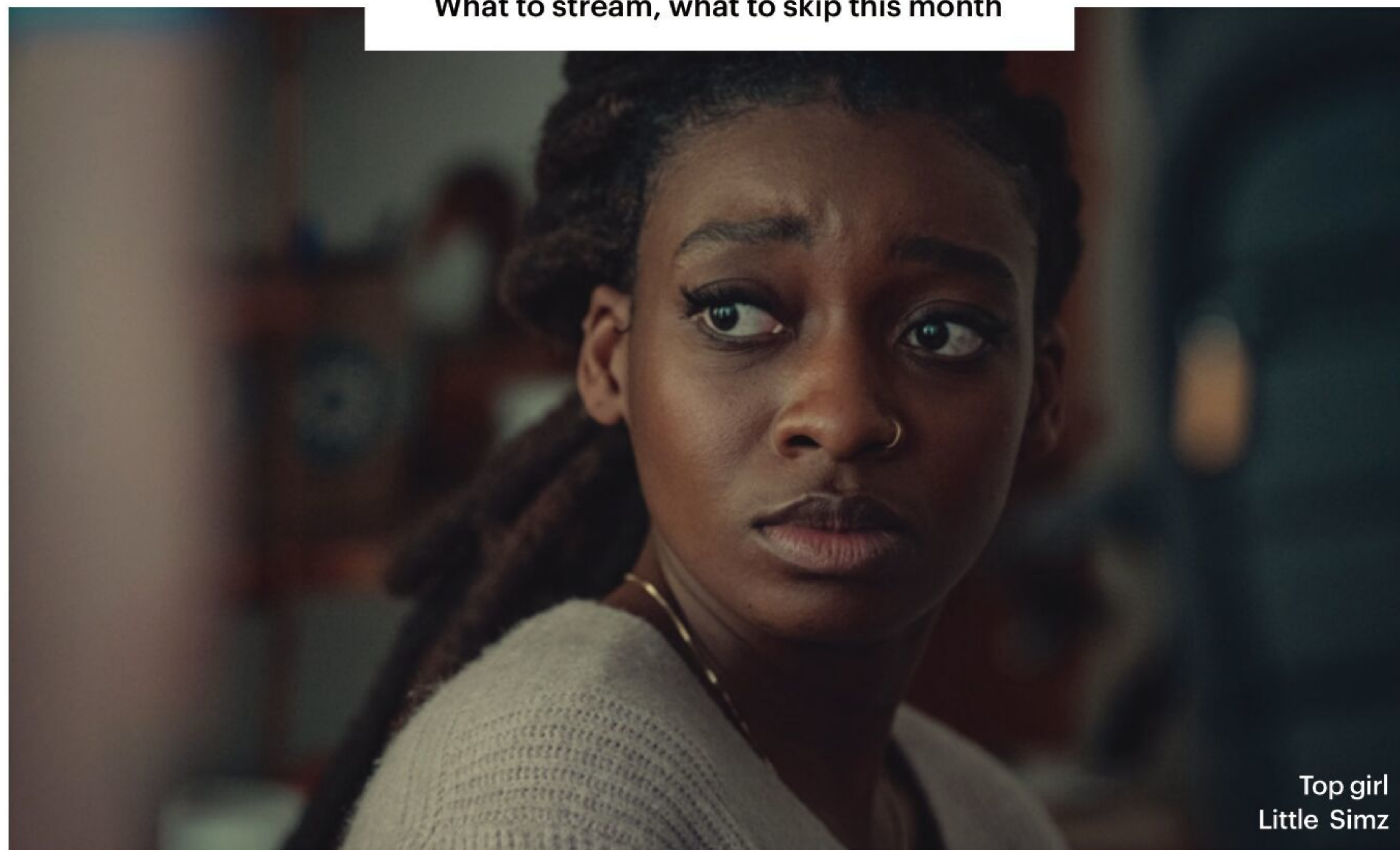
"Larry and Sergey started Google in a garage. Bezos started in a Starbucks. You're going to be the first billionaire to start in a supply closet," says Miguel McKelvey (Kyle Marvin), introducing Neumann to his first work space.

The only issue here (and one that plagues most streaming networks) is that some viewers may find the series too long to stomach. It is not that it doesn't have enough material – it clearly does, and it is well told – it's the fact that we all know that if this story had come about ten years ago, it would have been told tightly in a two-hour film (as with Facebook film *The Social Network*), rather than eight near one-hour episodes. You do question whether such companies and individuals deserve such prolonged attention. Ironically, in this case, perhaps that's also the point. **SCOTT BRYAN**

TOP BOY: ANA BLUMENKRON/NETFLIX, CHRIS HARRIS/NETFLIX; HOLDING: ITV

WATCH LIST

What to stream, what to skip this month



Top girl
Little Simz

LIFE ON THE EDGE

Top Boy

NETWORK	Netflix
AIR DATE	Out now
★★★★★	

For a show as popular as *Top Boy*, it feels as if they have had to overcome constant challenges to get it to screen. The first two series were shown on Channel 4, but despite attracting critical acclaim the broadcaster didn't renew it for a third.

Then, following support by Drake, who ended up becoming one of the show's executive producers, the series was picked up by Netflix and became a hit internationally, only for filming of the show's fourth season (which Netflix, confusingly, refers to as the show's second) to be delayed due to the pandemic.

A concern would be whether an 18-month gap between the last season and these new episodes would result in audiences naturally moving on. Yet *Top Boy* is just

as captivating as ever, simply because hardly any other show manages to feel so consistently and compellingly authentic.

We start with Dushane (Ashley Walters) aiming to expand his empire internationally, while a life with Shelley (Simbi Ajikawo aka Little Simz) is making him think about stepping back. But will he become a victim of his own success?

The result is a rollercoaster of thrills that will keep you gripped from beginning to end. **SCOTT BRYAN**

A-list celebrities for his own chat show, he somehow manages to find the time to be a bestselling novelist. His first novel, *Holding*, has now been adapted into a television drama. And honestly, Graham, you make it look so easy.

Directed by the comedian Kathy Burke, starring Siobhán McSweeney and set in a small-town village in West Cork, the strength of the series is how it captures the banality of petty local disputes. It all starts with Sergeant PJ Collins (Conleth Hill) who is

drafted in to calm down a dispute over a nearby building, which, according to local shopkeeper Pauline McLynn (aka. Mrs Doyle from *Father Ted*) has been painted in an

unsightly colour. "A brown house! We have made an agreement as a village! He could have had a Tuscan yellow or a duck-egg blue!"

After human remains are found at a construction site, Collins is thrown into his first serious investigation in his career, only to realise that he is completely out of his depth. This well-plotted thriller makes a delightful change from those police dramas where detectives always seem to be several steps ahead of the viewer.

SCOTT BRYAN



Trouble in the village

IRISH CHARM

Holding

NETWORK	ITV
AIR DATE	Out now
★★★★☆	

When Graham Norton isn't delivering one-liners on *RuPaul's Drag Race UK*, providing wry commentary on Eurovision, presenting weekend afternoons on Virgin Radio, or pulling chair-tipping levers on fans alongside



Brooding
Ashley Walters

Film

Julie (Renate Reinsve) and Aksel (Anders Danielsen Lie)

TRYING LIFE ON FOR SIZE

A young woman's struggles with adulting deliver laughs by the bucket-load in this charming – and Oscar-nominated – Nordic romcom

The Worst Person In The World

STARRING Renate Reinsve, Anders Danielsen Lie, Herbert Nordrum

DIRECTED BY Joachim Trier

★★★★☆

the types of mistakes we actually make – from the pain of splitting up with someone to the worry that you might regret it. If you suffer from decision paralysis about anything from your morning coffee to having children, this is a movie for you.

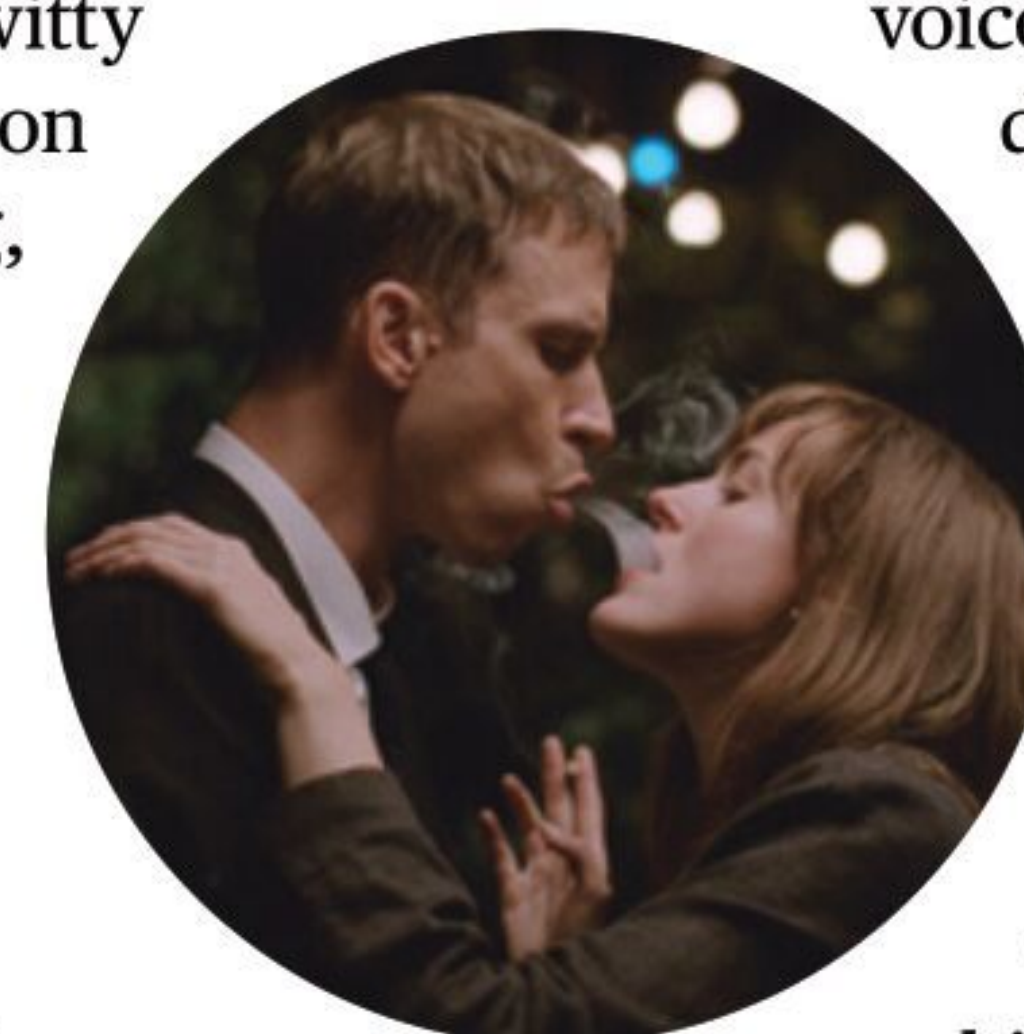
Although it centres around an unconventional woman, *The Worst Person In The World* is written by two men, and there are points where their

voices feel more dominant than their heroine. Could the script have used a woman's touch?

Perhaps. But ultimately, this is less about gender than that elusive quality: maturity. It doesn't offer any easy answers, but it's a wonderful place to spend a couple of hours. **ANNA SMITH**

out-loud scenes fuelled by alcohol and mushrooms as well as bittersweet sight gags about well-meaning but faintly useless parents. There's also witty commentary on mansplaining, woke culture and oral sex blogs.

It doesn't romanticise romance, but instead explores the joys, perils and uncertainties with an even hand and a comic, ultimately poignant, touch. It's peppered with the kinds of conversations we actually have, and



OSCAR-NOMINATED romantic comedy' is not a phrase you hear very often – but this contender for the Best International Feature and Best Original Screenplay gongs is not your average romcom. This is edgy, modern-day Oslo, and our heroine is far from a typical loveable klutz. Julie (Renate Reinsve) is a headstrong young woman who flits between boyfriends and professions with alacrity – faddish, but committed... until the next one catches her eye.

After getting serious with a cartoonist, Aksel (Anders Danielsen Lie), she

spontaneously crashes a party and meets Eivind (Herbert Nordrum – pictured, inset). Knocking back the drinks, they decide to get as intimate as possible that evening without technically cheating on their partners. Julie is plunged into an amusing scenario, and a palpable dilemma.

How do we know about her internal conundrum? It's not because she confides in her slightly-less-attractive best female friend; she doesn't appear to have one. Instead, we know this because writer-director Joachim Trier (*Thelma*, *Louder Than Bombs*) is a masterful filmmaker, and

Reinsve is a magnetic performer who demands instant attention – imagine an indie, Norwegian Rose Byrne. She earns every bit of the Best Actress prize she received for the film at the Cannes Film Festival, and her nomination for Leading Actress at the British Academy Film Awards. Her male co-stars also deliver the goods, with rounded, relatable characters.

The Worst Person in the World is a lot of fun. It zips through narrated character summaries with whip-smart writing and a disco soundtrack, like a dark and mischievous *Amélie*. There are laugh-

THE WORST PERSON IN THE WORLD: (TOP) KASPER TUXEN/OSLO PICTURES/NEON, (INSET) VERDEN'S MENNESKE/OSLO PICTURES/NEON; TRUE THINGS: THE BUREAU; THE PHANTOM OF THE OPEN: NICK WALL; ESCAPE FROM MOGADISHU: WELL GO USA



Mark Rylance plays Maurice Flitcroft

FIRST TIME ROUND FOR THE WORLD'S WORST GOLFER

The Phantom of the Open

STARRING
Mark Rylance,
Sally Hawkins

DIRECTED BY
Craig Roberts

★★★★☆

HEARD THE ONE ABOUT the guy who competed at pro golf, despite never having played a round in his life? The strange-but-true story of Maurice Flitcroft is a gift to a comedy screenwriter, and *Paddington 2* scribe Simon Farnaby makes amusing work of his life story in a likeable dramedy directed by Craig Roberts (*Just Jim*, *Eternal Beauty*).

Mark Rylance plays Flitcroft as a genuine eccentric, his self-belief bordering on delusion and his methods verging on criminal, with his heart always remaining in the right place. Rylance's fellow Oscar-winner Sally Hawkins sails through the role of the supportive wife, while the rest of the strong cast includes Rhys Ifans, and twins Christian and Jonah Lees as Maurice's disco-dancing sons.

Spanning several decades from the 70s, this suffers from Rylance having to play multiple ages, and it isn't as big a crowd-pleaser as *Paddington 2*, or the similarly themed *Eddie the Eagle*. But that would be pretty hard, to be fair. Much like its hero, it's a weird and rather charming slice of British oddness that will have you smiling indulgently at the screen. **ANNA SMITH**

AN UNLIKELY ALLIANCE

Escape from Mogadishu

STARRING
Kim Yoon-seok,
Zo In-sung

DIRECTED BY
Ryoo Seung-wan

★★★★☆

A GRIPPING TRUE STORY about enemies brought together through conflict is a winning formula and this Korean thriller makes very entertaining work of the premise. Set in Mogadishu in 1991, it charts the efforts of the South Korean ambassador Han Shin-sung (Kim Yoon-seok) to charm the Somali president in order to get Somalia's vote for UN membership. A major spanner in the works is Kang Dae-jin (Zo In-sung), a spy for South Korea, who's after the same thing. But when civil war breaks out, the men are forced to put their differences aside and band together for the sake of their families and colleagues.

South Korean director Ryoo Seung-wan is very assured, and this works as quite the calling card for a potential Hollywood helmer: it's packed with all the spectacle and character you'd expect from a western blockbuster. And it skirts just the right side of sentiment, delivering a moving finale without tugging too obviously on the heartstrings. Powered by a sharp script and terrific performances from some of Korea's finest, *Escape from Mogadishu* is a thoroughly engaging watch that's as witty as it is nerve-wracking – even if you know the ending (the clue's in the name). **ANNA SMITH**



Kang Dae-jin (Zo In-sung), Kim Myung-hee (Kim So-jin) and Han Shin-sung (Kim Yoon-seok)



Kate (Ruth Wilson) and Blond (Tom Burke)

SEDUCTION IN A SMALL TOWN

FRESH FROM PLAYING an unsuitable posh boyfriend in *The Souvenir*, Tom Burke slums it as an unsuitable non-posh boyfriend in this indie drama opposite Ruth Wilson. She plays Kate, a girl who's drifting through life in a coastal town, working in a benefits office where the only, er, benefit appears to be meeting cocky ex-convicts who waltz in demanding a date. An intense affair follows with 'Blond', but Kate never knows where she stands.

An immersive, intimate film from director Harry Wootliff (*Only You*), *True Things* features an excellent performance from Wilson in particular. Her Kate is smart, funny, mercurial and at odds with the world around her, unable to fit in with her friends and colleagues or conform to the expectations of her concerned parents. If you're ready and willing to follow Kate on her emotional journey, *True Things* yields rich rewards. **ANNA SMITH**

True Things

STARRING
Tom Burke, Ruth Wilson

DIRECTED BY
Harry Wootliff

★★★★☆



CLOSE-UP

Why We Need Another Batman

The Caped Crusader wrote the book on damaged superheroes – which is why he makes sense now more than ever

BY DAVID FEAR

IT STARTED with the logo. They didn't even put the movie's name on the teaser poster, because everyone already recognised the symbol for a decades-old comic-book character. But this oval with a bat silhouette was... different. It gave the impression of being ominous, sombre, darker. This wasn't your father's Batman.

Then, the trailer for Tim Burton's 1989 *Batman* showed up, featuring an intimidating Michael Keaton in a black-on-black batsuit – Mr. Mom broke bad! – and everything changed. Gone was the guy in a grey unitard who went “Bam, Pow, Zap!” This was a loner who brooded, pouted, and psychologically snapped. Exit the Caped Crusader. Enter the Dark Knight.

Long before the MCU was a glimmer in Kevin Feige's eye, *Batman* changed superhero movies – everything that's come since has either been a variation on its tortured superhero wrestling with supervillains and personal demons, or a reaction to it. And with the release of Matt Reeves' *The Batman* on 4 March, the latest screen incarnation of the

DC character doubles down on the darkness. Looking like he's taking a break from fronting a My Chemical Romance cover band, a smudge-eyed Robert Pattinson gives us another Bruce Wayne in another Gotham City gone to seed, fighting another batch of familiar but slightly revised bad guys. The song remains the same – it's just more dirge-like than ever.

FROM LEFT: WARNER BROS./EVERETT COLLECTION; JONATHAN OLLEY/DC COMICS/WARNER BROS.; 20TH CENTURY FOX FILM CORP./EVERETT COLLECTION; OPPOSITE: SIMON CHILD/NOONPROJECT



Opposite, from left: Christian Bale in *The Dark Knight Rises*; Robert Pattinson in 2022's *The Batman*; Adam West in TV's *Batman*

To
paraphrase an
agent of chaos:
why still so serious?

Because that's the Batman that's embedded in the public imagination, a 180-degree turn from the idea of a Batusi-dancing, boob-tube do-gooder of the 60s. The original Batman was more Chandleresque gumshoe than Adam West's "Careful, old chum" father figure. The producers of the TV show wanted something that resembled a series of pop-art panels come to life, however, which is how we got what writer Glen Weldon dubbed "the Camp Crusader".

Then, in 1986, writer-artist Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* dared to ask: what kind of person dresses up as a bat every night and pummels criminals? The answer: someone who's undoubtedly psychologically cracked and probably psychotic. Suddenly, the idea that not all superheroes wear capes – but an antihero *could* – became an intriguing pop-culture ideology. Because Batman's superpower isn't the ability to fly, or run fast, or talk to fish. It's that he has a pathology. He *must* put on the costume and fight. He's damaged goods who is trying to use that

damage to do good.

Burton's *Batman* positions him as both a larger-than-life urban legend and the second coming of Travis Bickle, violent enough for thrill-seeking teens yet complex enough for chin-stroking adults. Throw in years of prefab brand recognition and you had yourself a marketable "edgy" hit. The whole template for neurotic, tortured screen superheroes and their popularity – we love you, Superman, but we've chosen darkness – starts here. And whenever Batman began to drift back into camp territory (two words: bat nipples), the franchise took a timeout before hitting a reset button and dragging the character back into the shadows where he belonged.

That, and to stop treating him like a bat-joke once and for all. It's why *Batman Begins*, the first of Christopher Nolan's game-changing trilogy, is closer to a bat-procedural than a superhero movie; Christian Bale doesn't even put on the mask until an hour in. *The Dark Knight* (2008), still considered the gold standard for the genre, may be best remembered for Heath Ledger's unhinged, unnerving take on the Joker, but it's also a morality tale about the queasy grey area that exists in the phrase "the ends justify the means."

Every decade gets the screen Batman it needs: West's millionaire-a-go-go and his teen sidekick run around bopping bad guys and keeping the '66 status quo intact as the American empire engaged in a cold war with Russia, an increasingly hotter war in Asia, and with internal strife at home. (It's all one big cartoonish adventure where the good guys win, kids! Trust us!) The 80s Caped Crusader comes at the end of a decade when social inequity and urban paranoia



BREAKING DOWN THE BATMEN

Adam West

1966-68

West hammed it up for three seasons.

Michael Keaton

1989-92

Fans protested, but Tim Burton knew exactly what he was doing when he cast the comic as the Caped Crusader.

Val Kilmer

1995

The *Top Gun* star's one-and-done gig in the Batsuit is a lot better than you remember.

George Clooney

1997

We forgive you, George.

Christian Bale

2005-12

The intense actor brought his Method-y madness to the role — and gave us an unforgettable Dark Knight.

Ben Affleck

2016-17

Batfleck had the right chin for the part — if only he'd been given better Bat-lines to say.

had reached an all-time high, and Rambo and Bernhard Goetz were considered folk heroes. So it's not a coincidence that the idea of a villain who just wants to see the world burn would resonate several years after the worst terrorist attack on US soil, or that a superhero would view a surveillance state as a necessity during a prolonged War on Terror.

By the time Bale hangs up the cape in *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012), the movies have made good on Wayne's assertion that "as a symbol... I can be everlasting." As a symbol and an intellectual property, Nolan's movies did more to enshrine Batman as a mythic figure and a perpetual moneymaker at the very moment that superhero movies became the last sure thing in Hollywood. The weariness, the raspy voice, the willingness to cross the line if it gets the job done — they're characteristics of the obsessive vigilante that we now view as Batman touchstones, period. He is our eternal avatar of bleak-buster escapism, which can be both a feature and a bug. It's why the "Batfleck" we see in Zack Snyder's earlier DCEU films feels so stifling; it's practically a parody of Dark Knight-hood. (You can imagine Snyder declaring, "Yeah, I could totally make him darker.")

But that's what makes Pattinson's welcome-to-the-black-parade iteration so potentially interesting. Pattinson's emo-volatile, beast-mode vibe, fighting a world that's falling apart, feels like an all-too-apt fit for our on-the-brink moment. ("He's got an inner kind of rage," Reeves said when asked what inspired him to go after the *Twilight* star for the role. "I can feel this desperation.") It may be the newest flavour of grim, but we're living in grim times. At his best, the Dark Knight rises to reflect the world happening outside the theatres and your screens. In 2022, this antihero has his work cut out for him. 🦇



RS ROAD TEST

Bentley Flying Spur Hybrid

When you build a grand touring luxury sports saloon that runs on both an electric motor and a petrol engine you don't just tick the eco-credentials box, you create a silent-running auditorium...

T

he law of unintended consequences is a wonderful thing. The army of scientists assembled by NASA to enable space travel has delivered us terra firma folk everything from memory foam and laser eye surgery to camera phones and high-functioning artificial limbs.

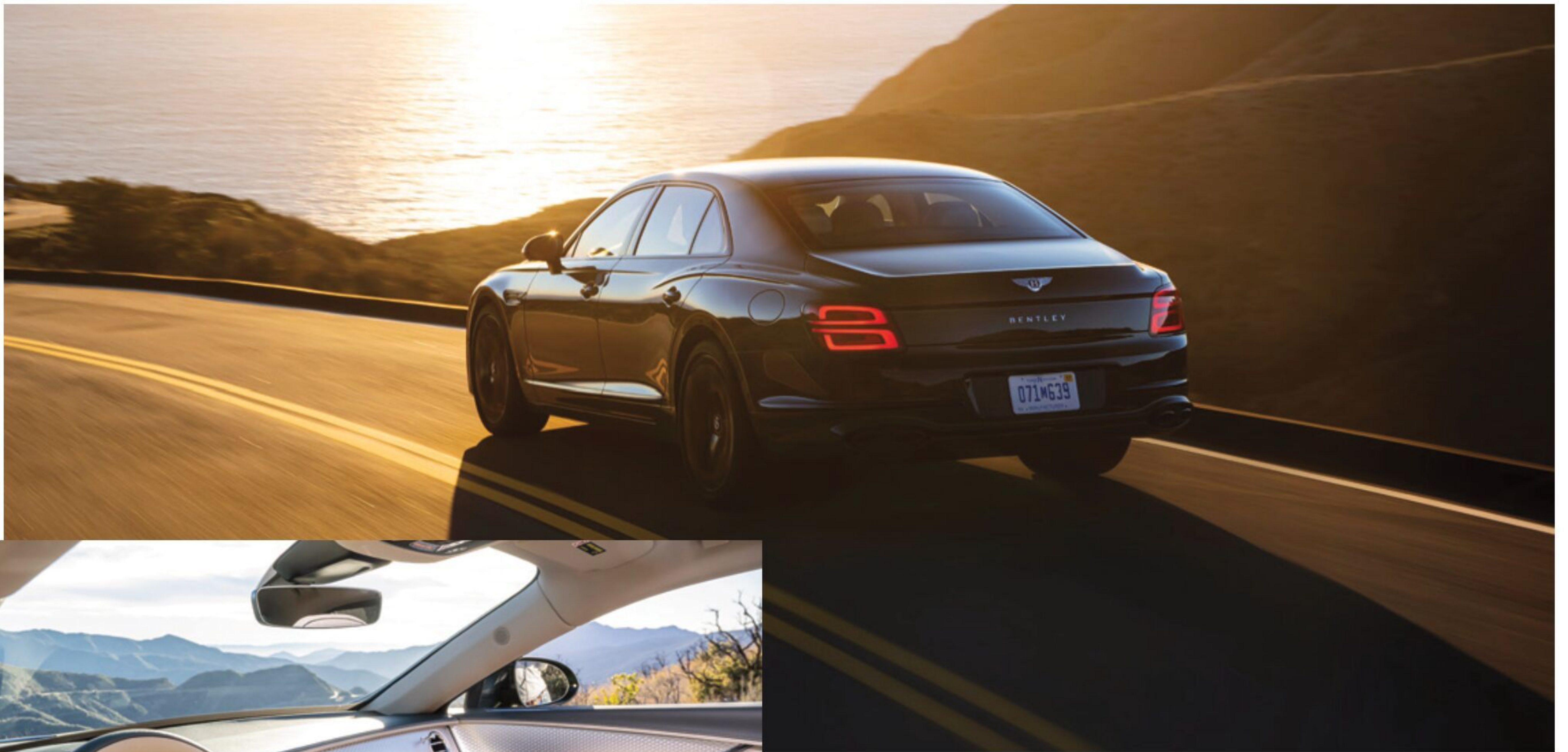
Setting aside for a moment the thousands of man hours that went into developing a biro for American astronauts

that wrote when upside down, while the Russians simply took a pencil, broadly speaking, humankind did well on account of the space race, even if that wasn't the starting point.

There are unintended consequences to be found in the new Bentley Flying Spur Hybrid, too.

It exists in this form because legislation and an environmental conscience dictate as much. By the end of the decade, you'll not be able to sell a car that isn't fully electric in most major markets across the developed world.

In the meantime,



while battery technology races to get to the point where a 400-mile range the equivalent of current petrol cars is achievable, Bentley's best-of-both-worlds combo of a 2.9-litre V6 petrol powerplant plus an electric motor located between the transmission and the engine delivers low emissions and range.

Together, they produce a total of 536bhp and 553lb/ft of torque to deliver a surge from the line that is characteristically Bentley and a driving range of almost 450 miles; 25 of them on electric power alone, should you

wish. So far, so good. An agreeable shot at what Bentley describes as "sustainable luxury" that leaves many of the brand traits intact.

The unexpected consequence, however, is that in full electric mode (or when cruising at motorway speeds), you sit in a handcrafted cocoon, surrounded by soft leathers and open-pore woods, in a space that is all but completely silent. More than a century spent refining the combustion engine to the point that as much noise, vibration and harshness was eradicated as

QUICK STATS

POWER
536BHP
TORQUE
553LB/FT
0-60MPH
4.1 SECS
TOP SPEED
177MPH
PRICE
£170,000

possible, and as little fuel was consumed as was practical, tossed away in the face of mandated electric assistance that delivers silence as standard.

And it's glorious.

We get to try the car in California, the most environmentally conscious bit of a country that consumes more than any on Earth, and so roll along the revered Pacific Coastal Highway as though in a stupor, with the ocean breakers seen but not heard. It's oh so quieter than anyone but Björk might believe.

At least until you realise that, in essence, Bentley has created an auditorium on wheels – and the Naim sound system featured on our car has weaponised that. What, after all, is silence but a vacuum to be filled?

And so we do – with the theatrical pop-punk exaltations

of Yungblud, with the recently re-crafted studio-polished Abba, with the working man's rock hero that is Sam Fender. The light and shade, the detail, the delicacy, the outright power – it's all here to appreciate, wrapped in a luxury car made in a carbon-neutral factory in Cheshire.

Did Bentley set out to put a stadium sound stage on wheels as a priority? Possibly not, but the inaudible powertrain delivers an opportunity and there's no denying it's been seized. To the extent, as we discuss elsewhere in the issue, they've commissioned the maestro of movie music, Steve Mazzarro, to write a soundtrack that demonstrates as much.

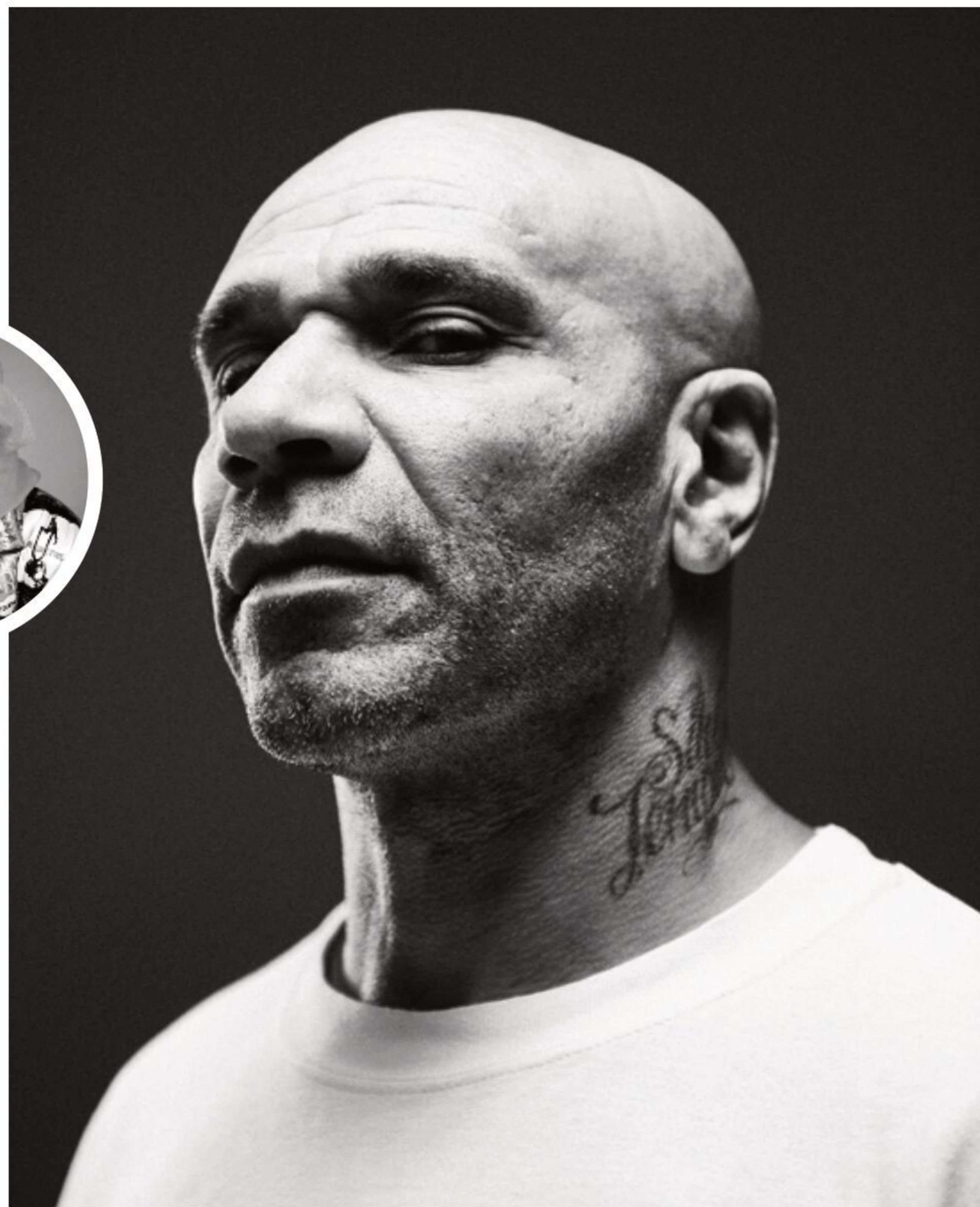
Unintended consequence or not, we call shotgun.

DARREN STYLES

BENTLEYMOTORS.COM

Goldie

*The Thailand-based drum'n'bass and jungle pioneer talks to DJ SHERELLE about looking back to move forward, the continual rise of drum'n'bass, and his new album **The Start of No Regret***



SHERELLE: I was reading an interview where you were saying it was good for you to go back and find music like Motown. It's the same way I feel when I go back to say, your music, or back even further.

GOLDIE: It's like the Old Testament. I pride myself that I was there, and I'm still here living and breathing. It's all about crew mentality. Reinforced Records was the stable, the university.

We pride ourselves on the fact that Reinforced was a crew: me, Mark ["Marc Mac"] Clair, Dennis "Dego" McFarlane, Ian Bardouille, Gus Lawrence. You had all of these guys that were just making this stuff who were just so different.

That music became the Motown for drum'n'bass music. It's the Motown era for me. I don't care who you are, what you say, I get to say it: a lot of this new stuff is shit, because it's based on nothing. It's based on formulaic music, which will not last five or ten years, because it's not built on the culture in that sense. If this new drum'n'bass music is built without any heritage or quoting heritage, it's a bit like someone going, "I've just cut some trees down and I'm going to plant lots of birch trees here, because they're going to grow into great trees." No, they're going to have very weak roots.

Am I right in saying that Marc told you to keep all of your records because you never

know when you might need them again?

Yeah. He always said to me, "Keep everything." And I pulled out versions even from the remastering of *Timeless* that I never thought I had. I've even gone to the point where I've found things that I'm like, "Jesus Christ...." I've found 'St. Darkie' on there, which is a version only Ryder had.

And I think I challenge anyone: the amount of love for any genre that you have, love it like it's a child. We've had versions on dub that we just kept on dub for years, and we wouldn't give anyone because we just wanted to have this nostalgic feel, knowing it would [feel like] that later on. I've got bags of acetates under the table. It's a very blessed era.

The amazing Subjective album, the project between you and James Davidson, is called *The Start of No Regret*. Short answer, what is the idea behind the title?

The idea is that I can do anything that I want within music. And I have no regrets in doing so.

How did it come about?

Well, James was on my label, we did the Ulterior Motive *Fourth Wall* album. And I said, "Look, just tag along." I did a couple of drum sessions over at Battery Studios, and I said, "Look, man, you're ready." He said, "Oh, I'm not ready." I was like, "You ready, mate? Just come. You're ready." I'd heard a couple of things that he was doing that were down tempo

"I'm a professional child at heart. That's my job description. The only thing that matters is the art"

and weren't getting the light of day, and I went, "Mate, you need to come to Thailand." I've had a great time writing the album. It's been fun, and it's a fun album.

You did graffiti. How did you get into that?

I was in New York, aged 17. I was in the Bronx with Brim Fuentes and we were doing the documentary, *Bombing*. And that was it. I've been part of TATS CRU since then. I was doing sculpture with my hands, and then graffiti came along: it blew my mind. My family was broken, I was living at home. And then I found hip-hop in New York and I gravitated to what the crew meant. There's this generation that fell out of love with their parents, because their parents were from another era.

I'm going to read one of your quotes back to you: "So creating art is like being sick. You bring up all your innermost thoughts and then you have to ask yourself why you're doing it." How do you feel about this statement now, in 2022?

Nothing's really changed in what I'm saying apart from not saying the word, 'like' as much. I saw interviews that I did at 17, and they asked: "What do you want to do when you grow up?" And I was, "Well, it's like this, I want to do well, I want to, like, change things, I want to, like..." That's me because I'm a child of culture. I'm a professional child at heart. That's my job description: professional child. The only thing that matters is the art. ®



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